Shaping Futures, Shaping Lives

An investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools

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Abstract

The role of boarding schools in helping to overcome education disadvantage for First Australian young people has received increasing attention, and funding, from government, the media, and private sector investors in recent years. Notwithstanding policy approaches encouraging, and for some populations even mandating, that students leave home to attend boarding school, little research has sought to understand how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience ‘mainstream’ boarding school and what impact it has on later life outcomes for them, their families and communities.

It is well understood that a wide range of social factors, ranging from the macro-social to the individual, influence the health of populations generally, and Indigenous populations specifically (Saggers 2007, Anderson 2007). Education attainment levels are recognised as one of the social determinants of Indigenous health (Dunbar 2007). By contrast, in education policy, scant regard is paid to the social factors that underpin education engagement and success for First Australian students in predominantly non Indigenous schools.

This thesis uses a narrative, multiple case study method to examine the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools, and in their post school years. In all, seventy-four interviews were conducted, across every state and territory except Tasmania. These include interviews or focus group discussions with alumni of boarding schools (35); parents or community members (27); and school leaders or staff in boarding schools (12). Interview data were analysed to identify what participants sought to achieve through boarding school; what constrained or enabled positive outcomes; and what were the actual outcomes achieved by alumni in the short, medium and, in some cases, long terms.

This research presents the most comprehensive evidence to date on the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Australian boarding schools. It establishes that as well as being determinants of health, racism, trauma, and social connectedness were also fundamentally important to education success for participants in this study. Data presented here indicate that when schools engaged authentically and
proactively with these issues they assisted these young people to maximise the benefits they derived from education.

Findings challenge the narrow and exclusively empirical measures currently used to define education ‘success’. Whereas schools and scholarship providers focus on preparing students to fit into school systems, research findings indicate that more critical attention should be paid to the systems themselves.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

i. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Preface;

ii. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

iii. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices

Marnie O’Bryan
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In every respect this research belongs to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from around the nation who have trusted me with personal narratives, memories, and insights on the role boarding schools played in shaping their lives, and the lives of their families and communities. I present this work back to them with the greatest respect and gratitude.

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Publications

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**Issue 1:**

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Goddard, A.
MacFie, A.
Stewart, R.
Disbray, S.
O’Bryan, M.
Drennen, H. and McCord, N.
Kent, H., May S. and Gough, J.
Pechenkina, E.

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Bradley, J. and Johnson, S.
Corn, A.J. and Patrick, W.J.
Godinho, S., Woolley, M., Webb, J. and Winkel, K.
Wauchope-Gulwa, H.
Fogarty, W., Lovell, M. and Dodson, M.
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Salvestro, D., Studd, A. and Stubbs, W.
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Glossary of terms and acronyms

Aboriginal  First peoples of mainland Australia

ABSTUDY  A Federal Government scheme which helps cover the costs associated with education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

AIEF  Australian Indigenous Education Foundation

ASGC  Australian Standard Geographical Classification

First Australian  Includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from across the nation

Homelands  The homelands movement dates back to the 1970s. Small Aboriginal groups – often families or other closely related people – left mission-run larger communities and moved back to their traditional land. Reasons for doing this included escaping dysfunction in major settlements; maintaining country and the protection of sacred sites; maintaining language and traditional customs. Source: https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/aboriginal-homelands-outstations#ixzz4hUr2MmXP

Indigenous  The term Indigenous is used respectfully to describe First Australian and other First Nations peoples from around the world

ISCEA  Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage

IYLP  Indigenous Youth Leadership Program

Koorie  Koorie (or Koori) is the group self-description of many people of Indigenous descent living in Victoria and south-central New South Wales.

Participants  Participants have been de-identified and ascribed a number and code: ‘A’ for Alumni; ‘P’ for parent/community member; ‘T’ for teacher/school leader. Alumni and Parent participants are also identified by geographic region.

PISA  The Program for International Student Assessment

Regional/Remote/Very Remote  Remoteness structure as determined by Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) and using the Doctor Connect locator (see http://www.doctorconnect.gov.au/locator)
Children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were removed from their families by the Australian Federal and State government agencies and church missions, under acts of their respective parliaments.
Part 1

Research context and design
Chapter 1 Introduction

Research Context

Each year, thousands of First Australian students from around Australia leave home to attend boarding schools in cities and towns far from their homes.\(^1\) This phenomenon is part of a national strategy to reduce the disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in this country (Commonwealth of Australia 2016). Many families pin their hopes on the potential for boarding schools to help them create the best future they can for their children and their communities. While ambitious claims are made about the success of students attending high performing boarding schools, there is little independent evaluation of these programs and even less that foregrounds the voices of young people and their families (Stewart 2015b).

This study focuses on the lived experience of First Australian young people in predominantly non-Indigenous boarding schools throughout the nation. It seeks to understand how that experience worked to shape participants’ education outcomes and their post-school lives. It is built around the voices of First Australian alumni and their families, so that institutions and policy makers might be better placed to understand and cater for these students within what Apple (2013, p15) describes as the ‘dense realities’ of their life situations. The data presented here will also assist families to make informed education choices for their children.

For First Australian students in boarding schools, their enrolment is typically and visibly the outworking of a social justice agenda. Whereas it is unlikely that they would have been the only scholarship holders in their school, generally the alumni interviewed in this study were the most visible. High performing athletes, musicians and scholars often receive financial endowments to attend fee-paying schools, but they are rarely identified

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\(^1\) Around 5,700 Indigenous secondary students received ABSTUDY Away from Home benefits at some point during 2015. Most of these students were in boarding schools, or staying in hostels, with a small number in private accommodation arrangements and more than three-quarters had a home address classified as ‘very remote’ or ‘remote’ (Closing the Gap Report 2017, p44).
by that distinction. First Australian students are, by contrast, closely associated with particular scholarship foundations. They are generally known within school communities to be part of the institution’s ‘Indigenous Program’. Many are called upon to give public testimonies of how boarding school changed their lives as part of ongoing fundraising campaigns, both during their school years and after they have finished. These dynamics inevitably require individuals to construct a ‘best case scenario’ public face but potentially set up a range of internal tensions which are not yet well understood by schools. These have consequences for how young people might negotiate the ‘system’, as well as how the system might work to shape and change them over time.

Programs developed with good will and noble intention to enable First Australian students access to high performing schools reflect a commitment to a fairer and more inclusive nation state. They embody a shared recognition that education is the essential key to build individual capacity and ultimately to transform the collective. Nonetheless they sit at the intersection of complex personal, institutional, cultural and political tensions (Nakata, 2007). Questions abound. Do educators and families share a consistent vision for these young people? How and at what cost is social transformation for First Australian communities achieved through education? Are schools culturally safe places for First Australian young people? Are schools with strong colonial links ready and willing to critically reflect on the values and assumptions that underpin their institutional cultures? What does ‘success’ look like? What impact does time spent in boarding school have on a person’s longer term life outcomes; where they choose to live and where they feel they belong? What role do First Australian students play in challenging prejudice and debunking stereotypes in predominantly non Indigenous schools? At what cost to themselves?

This research explores these questions.

The case studies and narratives that form the core of this research exemplify how individuals and their families devise strategies to address the broader social inequalities and contradictions they experience. It creates a space for participants to ‘talk back’ to schools and policy makers in the hope of effecting change. In the words of one participant,
this research ‘holds a mirror up to schools’ [Private conversation, A31, regional\(^2\)] in the hope that they may reflect on, and learn from, the experiences of those who have gone before. Through this project, alumni of boarding schools, their parents and communities were invited to ‘speak back’ to the system and tell schools ‘what we need to start doing here’ [A20, urban]. In speaking back, they shine a light on attitudes and assumptions built into policy priorities, and often reified in school practice. They highlight areas of both congruence and dissonance between what schools think they are doing, and how their actions are perceived by First Australian students and their families.

- **Positionality**

Bishop (2005) reminds us that the research process is an essentially political activity, where power relationships are cast and re-cast between researcher and researched. He reflects that the neo-colonial dominance of majority interests in New Zealand has resulted in a tradition of research into Maori people’s lives ‘that addresses concerns and interests of the predominantly non Maori researchers’ own making, as defined and made accountable in terms of the researchers’ own cultural worldview(s)’ (p110). Similar concerns are raised in the Australian context (Nakata 2007, Worby, Rigney & Ulalka Tur 2010, Yunkaporta, 2009).

As a non Indigenous researcher is it essential that the design for this study reflect the complexity of my own position. My critical standpoint emerges from the time and place in which I live, and is informed by my own life experience. Inevitably these factors have informed and influenced the way in which data have been collected, interpreted and analysed. For these reasons, ‘the reader is entitled to know something of the aims, expectations, hopes and attitudes that the writer brought to the field with [her], for these will surely influence not only how [she] sees things but even what [she] sees’ (Bryman, 2012, p39). I therefore begin by positioning myself in this study, then go on to define the parameters of the research context.

\(^2\) Participants have been de-identified by letter and number: ‘A’ for Alumni; ‘P’ for parent/community member; ‘T’ for teacher/school leader. Alumni and Parent participants are also identified by geographic region.
I do not come to this project as an objective observer. For the ten years prior to commencing this research, I worked in a large Independent boys’ school in Melbourne. I taught senior years English to a number of First Australian students from regional, remote and very remote areas; all came to the school on scholarship or bursary programs and resided in the school’s boarding houses. During this time, I was given the opportunity to establish and oversee a partnerships program working with local Koorie communities, as well as communities in remote Australia. I represented the school on the Victorian Indigenous Education Network (VIEN) of Independent and Catholic schools, and was invited, in a personal capacity, to sit on the Indigenous Education Focus Group at the Centre for Strategic Education. Through those organisations I remain actively involved in the Independent school sector but not in a paid capacity.

Over time I also made the acquaintance of students residing in a range of Melbourne boarding schools. I alternatively taught, tutored, mentored, was guardian to, fed, travelled with and befriended these young people and a number of their families. In times of crisis or transition various amongst them lived with our family for periods ranging from a few days to several months. On a number of occasions, young ones came to us with bags packed and a caveat from their boarding house that they were on suicide watch.

Experience confirmed my belief that justice demands First Australian young people have the opportunity to access high-expectation boarding schools where that is their informed choice, but it also made me aware of the difficulties they face along the way. While teachers and schools are right to expect the same commitment to learning from First Australian students as any others, it is imperative that they recognise the complex web of pressures that these young people may bring to the classroom. If education is the key to enabling lives they have reason to value, we who are educators must understand not only the particular life experiences these students and their families confront, but also the historic and structural impediments which exist in our institutions.

This study uses a critical methodological framework, and as a critical scholar I seek to enact Apple’s (2013) dictum:

‘[The] critical scholar activist… needs to act as a deeply committed mentor, as someone who demonstrates through her or his life what it means to be both an excellent researcher and a committed member of a society that is scarred by
persistent inequalities. She or he needs to show how one can blend these two roles together in ways that may be tense, but still embody the dual commitments to exceptional and socially committed writing and research and participating in movements whose aim is to interrupt dominance’ (p43)

This work takes a multi-disciplinary approach, moving between sociological and psycho-social frames, always relying on participant voices to uncover the complex social relationships and power dynamics at work as First Australian young people navigate life in and beyond dominant cultural schools and boarding houses.

It takes place at a time when First Australian students continue to work against a backdrop of inequality in many dimensions of social life. The educational disadvantages they experience are a subset of deeper social inequalities that are also reflected in health, employment, incarceration and community wellbeing statistics.

- Research Context: the state of the nation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up three percent of Australia’s population, with almost 80% living in regional or metropolitan areas. The Prime Minister’s annual ‘Close the Gap Report’ for 2017 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) confirms that while only 14% of First Australians live in very remote places, they make up 45% of all Australians living in those areas (p6). The population is young compared to other Australians: 36% of First Australians are aged 0-14, compared to 18% for the general population. They are also more likely to start families at a younger age: in 2015, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers were significantly younger than non Indigenous mothers (the median age was 25.1 years for First Australian mothers and 31 years for all mothers) and more likely to have smoked or consumed alcohol whilst pregnant. Twice as many First Australian babies were classified as low birthweight babies (12% compared to 6.2% for the general population) (Healthinfonet 2017). Low birthweight is associated with a range of poor health outcomes, including higher rates of subnormal growth, illnesses, and neurodevelopmental problems. These include mild problems in cognition, attention, and neuromotor functioning. Long-term follow-up studies conducted on children born in the 1960s indicated that the adverse consequences of being born low birthweight were still apparent in adolescence (Hack, Klein & Taylor 1995). These issues have obvious implications for longer term educational outcomes.
In terms of life expectancy, in 2013 the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) published revised estimates for expectation of life at birth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The ABS estimated that First Australian males born in Australia in 2010-2012 could expect to live to 69.1 years, 10.6 years less for non Indigenous males. The expectation of life at birth of 73.7 years for First Australian females born in Australia in 2010-2012 was 9.5 years less than for non Indigenous females (ABS 2013).

The social and emotional health and wellbeing (SEWB) of First Australian populations will be discussed in detail in later chapters, but it is worth noting by way of context, that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014-15 (NATSISS) found that the SEWB of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was compromised: 30% of respondents aged 18 years and over reported high or very high levels of psychological distress in the four weeks prior to the interview (Healthinfonet 2017). According to the 2014-2015 NATSISS, 68% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over experienced one or more selected personal stressors in the 12 months prior to the survey. The most prevalent stressors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were death of a family member or close friend (28% of people surveyed), followed by; unable to get a job (19%); serious illness (12%); other work-related stressors (11%) and mental illness (10%) (Healthinfonet, 2017).

Although improvements are being made towards achieving parity of education outcomes for First Australian students relative to the general population, there is still progress to be made in a number of key indices. In his ‘Close the Gap Report 2017’ the Prime Minister reported that school attendance for First Australian young people was 10% lower than for the wider population. Of school completion, nationally the proportion of Indigenous 20-24 year-olds who had achieved Year 12 or equivalent increased from 45.4 per cent in 2008 to 61.5 per cent in 2014-15. Over the same period, the rates for non Indigenous Year 12 completion sat at 84-85% (Commonwealth of Australia 2017).

One of the most concerning statistics in Australia is the rate of incarceration of First Australian people, and young people in particular. The Law Council of Australia reports that in 2013 26% of the nation’s jail population was made up of First Australian prisoners.
Disturbingly, Indigenous juveniles were 31% more likely to be in detention than non-Indigenous juveniles. Of young people given a custodial sentence, the Law Council of Australia reports that they are 74% more likely to reconvict than those given a non-custodial sentence (Law Council of Australia 2013).

Statistics such as those reported here all have implications for education. Some are used as justification for sending young people away from home for their secondary years. All have historical antecedents.

- **Research Context: understanding the historical legacy**

In contextualising this research project, it is important to understand the complex legacy of the past. Australia’s post-colonial history casts a long and sobering shadow over the contemporary landscape of Indigenous policy in general, and Indigenous education policy in particular. However compelling the social imperatives which recommend boarding over community-based education, any initiative which separates young people from their families, communities, languages and cultures must be examined through the prism of the past if the repetition of past mistakes is to be circumvented.

- **The colonial era: Asymmetries of power and the great Australian silence**

Unlike other countries colonised by the British, Australia was occupied and its land laws framed in the belief that this was a land without owners, *terra nullius*. The justification for such an audacious colonial claim was that Aboriginal people were ‘too primitive to be owners of the land’ (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 2017). Consequently, no formally binding treaties were ever negotiated with First Australians. This is in marked contrast to colonial interactions with Indigenous peoples in North America and New Zealand (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 2017).

Although the ‘bizzare conceit’ (Keating 1992) of the Australian continent as *terra nullius* was overturned by the High Court ruling in *Mabo and others v Queensland (No 2)* (1992), the doctrine is relevant insofar as it reveals two aspects of early inter-cultural relations that continue to resonate in modern Australia and which have implications for First
Australian students living and studying in ‘mainstream’ boarding schools. The first is the chronic imbalance of power between First Australians and the newly minted colonists (Stanner 1968, Clendinnen 2008); the second is the apparent inability of the British to apprehend the subtlety or sophistication of a world view utterly different from their own (Verran 1998).

Understanding the trauma of colonisation and how its intergenerational transmission might play out in the lives of young people and their families is not a given. In History textbooks and the narrative of national identity, our First peoples were for a long time written out of the script in favour of wool, wheat and the ANZAC legend. In his 1968 Boyer Lectures, anthropologist W.E.H Stanner described how the brutal realities of European conquest had become the subject of ‘the great Australian silence’ (Stanner 1968). He identified this ‘cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale’ as a ‘structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape’(p189). From an early fascination with the exotic ‘other’ (Clendinnen 2003), the First Peoples of the occupied land had quickly become a ‘problem’ to be dealt with (Commonwealth of Australia 1937). Their experiences of colonial expansion were relegated to the status of a ‘melancholy footnote’ (Stanner 1968, p190) to a ‘white-out’ version of history: ‘a simple tale of the triumph of the Anglo Celts over deserts and empty places, ignoring the mosaic of different peoples we have always been, ignoring our first people’ (Clendinnen 2008, p19).

- Government policy and ‘managing the Aboriginal problem’

From the initial period of dispossession, Indigenous policy can be divided into four broad areas and time frames that overlap considerably: protection (1840s-1950s), assimilation (1937-1970s), integration (1965-1970s) and self-determination (1972). Early government policy was predicated on the belief that the protection of Aboriginal people was best achieved if their individual will be substituted by the will of their guardian, the Chief Protector of Aborigines (Australian Law Reform Commission 1986). Under provisions of the Aborigines Act 1905, the Chief Protector of Aborigines had legal power to remove any Aboriginal or half-caste child under the age of sixteen from home and family to be
detained in an Aboriginal institution for ‘care, custody and education’. These children became part of what later came to be known as the Stolen Generations.

The practice of removing children from their families was informed by eugenicist assumptions, clearly articulated by the then Chief Protector of Western Australia at the inaugural Aboriginal Welfare Conference of 1937, which brought together Aboriginal authorities from across Australia. His remarks were reported in the press:

Mr Neville [the Chief Protector of WA] holds the view that within one hundred years the pure black will be extinct. But the half-caste problem was increasing every year. Therefore their idea was to keep the pure blacks segregated and absorb the half-castes into the white population. Sixty years ago, he said, there were over 60,000 full-blooded natives in Western Australia. Today there are only 20,000. In time there would be none. Perhaps it would take one hundred years, perhaps longer, but the race was dying (As quoted by Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997 p24).

This logic was used to justify the forced removal of children from their families between the 1890s and 1970s. Between 1910 and 1970, it is estimated that between one in three and one in ten First Australian children were taken from their families (Human Rights Commission, 2017). In 1995, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was asked by the federal government to conduct a National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their families. Two years later, the Commission handed down its landmark report called Bringing them home (HREOC 1997).

The History Wars

Contemporary historian Robert Manne claims that ‘Rowley’s trilogy represents one of the great scholarly and moral achievements of Australia’s intellectual history. With its publication and ‘absorption into the nation’s bloodstream’, Australia became a significantly different country (Manne 2003, p2). Not all Australians agreed: in 1993 Geoffrey Blainey described such works as promulgating a ‘black armband’ view of Australian history. His epithet captured the imagination of those anxious to ensure that the ‘Western liberal values and the British contribution to Australian society’ should not be diminished (Donnelly 2013). And so the ‘History Wars’ began (Macintyre 2003). Since that time, a pitched battle has been waged in the media and against the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority which, for its prioritisation of Indigenous and intercultural priorities, is from time to time accused of being ‘hostile towards the institutions, beliefs and grand narrative associated with Western civilisation that make this nation unique’ (Donnelly 2013).

Deficit Discourse and ‘The Gap’

Throughout the colonial era, First Australians were consistently cast in a deficit frame (Fforde, Lovett, Gorringe & Fogarty 2013). The assumption of racial superiority, and concomitant assumptions of cultural superiority, justified policy approaches that would lead to the eradication of First Australian languages, cultures and indeed people-hood within the Australian polity. This logic continued to be espoused well into the modern era:

Nobody who knows anything about these groups can deny that their members are socially and culturally deprived … The policy for them must be one of welfare. Improve their lot so that they can take their place economically and socially in the general community and not merely around the periphery. Once this is done, the break-up of such groups will be rapid’ (Bell 1964 page 68, as quoted in HREOC, 1997, p27).

Commentators observe that a nuanced manifestation of deficit continues to permeate policy settings today. Fogarty, Lovell and Dodson claim:

Political rhetoric is characterized (sic) by ‘deficit discourses’; that is, by modes of language and representation that frame Aboriginal identity within a narrative of deficiency, negativity, dysfunctionality and disempowerment (…). A focus on the
statistical ‘gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is one of the most common manifestations of deficit discourses. Indeed, attempts to quantify this ‘gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has become the default approach to defining policy problems in Australian Indigenous Affairs (2015, p4).

In her a critical analysis of Australian Indigenous education policy discourse and its political effects, Rudolph (2015) argues that ‘gap’ discourse continues to position First Australian students as the ‘problem’ and supports subtle forms of assimilation. She concludes:

‘While Indigenous educational disadvantage is understood to be a persistent problem, … the deficit construction of Indigenous students is also persistent, having strong historical echoes. The reason for Indigenous deficiency has been rearticulated through time: in the 1930s it was explained by ideas of racial disability, in the 1960s it was understood as cultural deprivation and in the present it is explained by historical discrimination. The normative binary framework used to identify deficiency against non-Indigenous success, however, remains in place.’ (piii).

Current policy priorities administered under the umbrella of the ‘Close the Gap’ campaign focus on remediation of disadvantage. Until now progress has been measured largely by alignment of outcomes with the mainstream, but the recently released Prime Minister’s Report into the Close the Gap suite of programs shows growing awareness of the importance of culture along with community social connectedness to outcomes in all domains of life (2017, p15). This heightened level of cultural awareness is in line with Australian life more generally. The distinctive cultures of our First Peoples are increasingly assuming a central place in the psyche of the nation and in the representation of Australian nationhood on the national and international stage. Through literature, media, film, the visual and performing arts, increased representation on the political stage, the contribution of First Australian leaders connotes a degree of national maturity that has been a long time in incubation. For the first time, the 2017 Prime Minister’s Report on Indigenous affairs began with a statement on the importance of culture both to outcomes, and to Australia’s national identity:
'The importance of culture cannot be underestimated in working to close the gap. The connection to land, family and culture is fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are the world’s oldest continuous cultures—they have stood the test of time. We must continue to preserve and respect Indigenous cultures for this generation and the future and we must acknowledge the impact of past policies on our First Australians, and work to heal the wounds of the past’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, p6).

Unfortunately, it would appear that education policy, particularly as it affects remote Australia, has not kept pace. Instead, high stakes testing regimes and a largely Eurocentric curriculum continue to disadvantage remote students and especially those with a language background other than English (Fogarty et al. 2015, Guenther 2014). Despite compelling evidence showing the importance of teaching and speaking traditional languages in terms of both community and individual wellbeing (Oldfield 2013), combined with a long-standing evidence base which argues for the use of first-language instruction for better education outcomes, discourses of education failure and monolingualism allow little space for Australian languages (Disbray 2015, Oldfield 2013).

Place-based education

From his long experience as a teacher in very remote Australia, Fogarty (2012) observes that ‘education that is not connected to the reality of a student’s life will fail’ and that for Aboriginal people, ‘country [is] what matters’ (p83). He argues that the contemporary state of Indigenous education in remote Australia cannot be understood without reference to ‘the dismal practices of both religious and government education systems in the past’. These include ‘banning students from learning their own languages, the training of Aboriginal students solely for domestic servitude and a complete absence of access to secondary education for the majority of remote Aboriginal students’ (p83). Notwithstanding this, and consistent with the findings of the Wilson Review of Education in the Northern Territory (2014), place-based education pathways continue to be limited in remote Australia. The Northern Territory Department of Education’s webpage reveals a strong bias toward regional or urban boarding programs and a minimalist offering to those electing to stay at home, or returning home prior to school completion:
‘If your child stays in the community they will continue their schooling at the local school.

The focus will be on post primary literacy and numeracy and an employment pathways program may be offered which will provide skills for your child to gain employment’ (NT Department of Education 2017).

For those young people who elect to remain at home and who aspire to achieve education outcomes commensurate with other secondary students, the likelihood of them fulfilling their ambitions is limited at best.

In looking to the boarding sector to improve education outcomes for First Australian students, no attention is given to how young people might be supported in their cultural identity. Nor has there been any investigation into how their cultural knowledge and language mastery might be impacted by long periods immersed in mainstream society. Equally, while the funding opportunities for boarding schools have grown, and the uncomplicated narrative of success promulgated by the media excites interest in Indigenous scholarship programs, no attention has been given to the cultural orientation of mainstream schools, and the cultural competence of the teachers in them. Questions arise as to whether this is an exercise in assimilation by any other name, and if not, how young people, communities and boarding schools have worked to avoid that outcome.

In 1967, Martin Luther-King famously declared that ‘the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice’ (King 1967). During his term in office, in difficult moments and in various iterations, US President Barak Obama invoked the same metaphor. His intent was always to position the present on the continuum of history, and in so doing to encourage the same ‘audacious hope in the future’ that Dr King had sought to inspire. Throughout Australia, young people and their families look to boarding schools to enact justice through education. Often they have no choice but to attend a boarding school. Throughout Australia, staff in boarding schools endeavour to play their part in bending the long arc of history ‘once more toward the hope of a better day’ (Obama 2008) for their First Australian students. Given the history of indifference that has informed their own education, coupled with a paucity of independent research available to inform contemporary programs, most are flying blind. This work seeks to build an evidence base to inform best-practice in schools and in government education policy.
Research questions

This research therefore seeks to address the following key questions;

1. What factors or influences did First Australian alumni of pre-dominantly non-Indigenous boarding schools identify as important in constraining or enabling their engagement and attainment at school; and how have these been instrumental in shaping their subsequent lifestyle, attitudes, ambitions and social networks?

2. What factors or influences did the parents and/or key community members of First Australian alumni of pre-dominantly non-Indigenous boarding schools identify as important in constraining or enabling engagement and attainment at school; and how do these participants believe those factors or influences have been instrumental in shaping the lifestyle, attitudes, ambitions and social networks of their young people?

In order to gain a deeper understanding of alumni participants’ lived experience, the study has also been guided by the following subsidiary questions:

- How did participants believe that immersion in a mainstream boarding school shaped young people’s self-concept while they were at school and after they left school?
- How did participants understand ‘success’?
- How are the experiences and reflections of participants from very remote, remote, regional and urban communities similar or different?
- What are the similarities/differences in experience between participants who graduated from Year 12 and those who did not?

Research significance

Insights gleaned from this research will assist in the development of programs and approaches that are genuinely responsive to the needs and respectful of the life circumstances of those whom schools aspire to serve. These objectives recommend a
narrative approach, foregrounding the voices of young people and those closest to them. They also require the development of a theoretical framework able to accommodate both personal and political perspectives. Given that the majority of participants in this study have finished school and look back on their experiences through adult eyes, the framework also needs to facilitate insight into changing ontological positions that reflect the passage of time (O’Toole and Beckett 2013, p45).

A note about race, ethnicity and indigeneity

It is necessary to distinguish concepts of ‘race’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘indigeneity’. Whereas ‘race’ is associated with biological and genetic determinism, ‘ethnicity’ emphasises social and cultural distinctiveness and places greater importance on world views, lifestyles and societal interaction (Durie 2005). Amongst the world’s races and ethnicities, Indigenous peoples are distinctive. Comprising approximately four per cent of the global population, Durie claims that they share a ‘longstanding bond with the land and the natural environment’. From this he identifies five ‘secondary’ features of indigeneity: time, culture, an Indigenous system of knowledge, environmental sustainability, and a native language (p2). These factors are known to have an impact on education outcomes (Bishop & Berryman 2002).3

Durie proposes a tripartite framework for considering race and ethnic based policies that include three broad goals:

• full participation in society, education and the economy (the participatory goal)
• certainty of access to Indigenous culture, networks and resources by Indigenous people (the indigeneity goal)
• fairness between members of society (the equity goal) (p9).

His framework informs the thinking in this study.

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3 In relation to language, First Australian people groups are distinctive in that they do not share a common language. This is in contrast to New Zealand, where te reo Māori is a common language, albeit with regional variations (Ministry of Culture and heritage 2015) or to Canada and Alaska where the Inuit language is a continuum, or dialect chain, that includes Alaskan Inupiaq and stretches from Unalakleet on Norton Sound across northern Alaska and northern Canada to east Greenland (Kaplan 2016). Like Australia, North America is also noted for its linguistic diversity.
Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the issue being investigated in this research project. It has broadly contextualised the role predominantly non Indigenous boarding schools play in redressing educational disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australian students. As a non Indigenous researcher, I have sought to clarify my own position. To the extent that I can, I have declared my own assumptions and made reference to the experiences that have given rise to them. I have sketched a brief outline of the historical antecedents to contemporary policy frameworks. In Chapter 2, I will engage in a more detailed review of literature on the political and education contexts for Indigenous boarding programs, and the historical and contemporary policy priorities that inform this initiative, both in Australia and in other colonised countries. I will look at the rationale and presumed benefits of boarding school programs, and then consider issues known to impact the health and wellbeing of First Australian populations insofar as they are relevant to education engagement and attainment.
Chapter 2

Boarding Schools in Australia: A literature review

Because they sit at the interface of the social and the individual, many of the issues raised in this thesis build on existing literature across a range of domains. These include youth research; psychology; sociology; public health; and education. In the interests of cohesion, pertinent scholarship will be discussed as a preface to reporting findings in subsequent chapters.

Although the body of literature on Indigenous education in Australia is extensive, relatively little research attention has been paid to the lived experience of First Australian students in boarding schools. A number of commentators remark on the paucity of quantitative or qualitative evidence to support this policy priority (Purdie & Buckley 2010, Mander 2012, Stewart 2014, Benveniste 2014, Biddle & Rogers 2015, Hodges 2016).

This chapter reviews existing literature from Australia and also draws on New Zealand, American and Canadian academic literature pertaining directly to Indigenous boarding programs. It begins by considering historical, and then contemporary, justifications for boarding school policy. The chapter contextualises Indigenous boarding programs within the broader landscape of Australian education policy.

Historical perspective on Indigenous students in boarding schools

History makes visible social and ideological perspectives and priorities that worked to inform boarding school policy in the past. Recognising how these might continue to have resonance in contemporary settings is central to developing more nuanced understandings of the costs and benefits of a boarding education, and how time living at boarding school works to shape futures for First Australian young people. Although in many ways Australia’s history is distinct from other colonised countries, there are also similarities that warrant reflection.
Boarding school as an instrument of assimilation

In 2009, the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues conducted a comparative study of Indigenous peoples and boarding schools around the world (Smith 2009). The report found that Indigenous peoples generally argue that the historical purpose of boarding schools was to assimilate Indigenous people into the dominant society in which they lived. This was true in each of Canada, North America, New Zealand and Australia.

In Canada and North America, Native children were forcibly removed en masse from their families and sent to live in ‘Residential Schools’ as a way to address the ‘Indian problem’. In America, the policy was justified on the basis that it was necessary to ‘Kill the Indian in him and save the man’ (Pratt 1892). Tragically in many cases neither the Indian nor the man survived: as at November 2014, the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission had identified 3,201 student deaths in Residential schools for the period from 1867 to 2000 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). Other sources claim twice that number of children died in Canadian institutions (Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health 2000). Adams (1995) argues that ‘Residential’ or boarding schools were ‘ideally suited’ for the purpose of ‘eradicating all traces of tribal identity and culture, replacing them with common-place knowledge and the values of white civilization’ (p335). Although he concludes that boarding school ‘failed to fulfil reformers’ expectations’ (p336), he and other commentators agree that the American Indian boarding school experience left an indelible mark on the history of the United States and Canada (Trafzer, Keller & Sisquoc 2006).

In analysing boarding school experience Trafzer, Keller & Sisquoc, use the motif of a traditional Native American monster story as a metaphor. They argue that for the students, the boarding schools, the English language, the foreign curriculum, and white officials represented monsters (pxii). Within their narrative, students are cast as traditional heroes who fight against the monster not for their own glory, but for the benefit of their people. They argue that the boarding school system was a ‘successful failure’: they acknowledge that government succeeded in providing ‘some measure of academic, domestic, agricultural, and vocational education to First Nations children’, but they ‘failed to assimilate completely Indian children or entirely destroyed the essence of their being
Native peoples’ (p1). The lives of these children were forever transformed by the ‘new world’ they entered, but the authors insist that they in turn transformed the dominant system that brought them into the schools (p29). They conclude that:

‘Like the heroes of old Native American stories, the children who attended boarding schools were forever changed, but they also emerged victorious, champions of their cultures, languages, and peoples’ (p29).

In the Australian context, boarding schools are not as closely associated with government policies of the forced removal of children as is the case in North America. Nonetheless, any policy priority of sending children away from family and community inevitably resonates with assimilatory practices of the past. The ‘Bringing them home’ (HREOC 1997) report into separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, observed that ‘past education policies have contemporary consequences’. The report goes on:

‘In our recent past, the education and training system ... have been tools to systematically strip Aboriginal communities of not only our culture, but the living heart of our communities, our children ... Schools were not only used to deny Aboriginal children a culturally appropriate education whether separated or not, they were also used as points from which Aboriginal children were ‘removed’’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, p485).

The report explicitly documents 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 (Fogarty 2015, p8). Similarly, Mander, in his study of the transition experience of Indigenous students in Western Australian boarding schools observes:

‘Experiences such as colonisation, massacres, genocide, the forcible removal of children from families, social and cultural marginalisation, and racism have all made a contribution to the construction of the contemporary context of Indigenous education’ (Mander 2012, p17).

Boarding schools in Australia, Canada and the USA were all implicated in colonial policy approaches that assumed that integration into white society represented the only realistic future for Indigenous peoples (Sommerlad 1976, Benveniste 2014, Smith 2009, Fogarty
Central to the policy of assimilation was the expectation that only by assimilating could Aboriginal people participate in mainstream economies and therefore ‘support the higher social standards which such natives will attain in the next generation’ (Hasluck as cited in Bolton 2004).

- **Boarding school to build leadership capacity and create an educated ‘elite’**

It is important to acknowledge that while boarding schools in colonised countries are strongly associated with an assimilatory ideal, often brutally implemented, they were not always opposed by First Nations peoples. Scholars in different national settings acknowledge the benefits that could be extracted from a boarding school education. Of the American Indian experience, Trafzer et al. (2006) contend:

> ‘Students fought the monster, struggled with it, and many survived the experience. Indian children who lived through the boarding school days were transformed. Many learned to speak, read, and write English, and they shared this and other knowledge with people back home. Students learned new subjects and trades, further developing themselves in new ways. But most Indians did not turn their backs on First Nations people or discard their cultural identities as Indians’ (p3).

In New Zealand, Smith (2009) reports that until 1941, no state funded secondary schooling was available to Maori. The only avenue available for a secondary education was in church run boarding schools. She claims that:

> ‘The purpose of the Maori denominational boarding schools was to take Maori students that seemed to have the highest potential for assimilation, inculcate European values and customs, and then send the ‘assimilated’ Maori students back home to uplift their communities. The goal was thus to create a class structure within Maori communities whereby the more ‘assimilated elite’ could manage those parts of the community deemed “savage” by Europeans’ (p17).

When in 1901 the Director General of Education sought to have Latin dropped from the syllabus, Maori elders resisted, arguing that ‘they could teach their children practical skills themselves; instead they wanted Maori youth to be equipped to become professionals’ (p18).
Background and context for contemporary Indigenous boarding programs in Australia

- ‘Closing the Gap’

In Australia, Indigenous education policy continues to be framed within a discourse of deficit that ‘positions Aboriginal identity within a narrative of deficiency, negativity, dysfunctionality and disempowerment’ (Fogarty 2015, Fforde et al. 2013, Guenther & Osborne 2013).

In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA), which set six targets for reducing Indigenous disadvantage. These are known as the ‘Closing the Gap’ targets (Australian National Audit Office 2014). Three of the six relate to education. Recognising that improved access to quality education is an important element of making progress towards the COAG targets, Governments of all political persuasions have consistently described boarding programs as making an important contribution to meeting the Closing the Gap targets (Australian National Audit Office 2014, Commonwealth of Australia 2016). This is consistent with what Fogarty, Lovell and Dodson (2015) describe as an ‘incremental and deliberate shift away from localized forms of educational development that acknowledge and include Indigenous wants and needs’ (p2).

Research into the lived experience of students in boarding schools sits within the context of this bi-partisan policy commitment to ‘Closing the Gap’ in Indigenous disadvantage.

Figure 1 (below) shows apparent retention rates for secondary school students by Indigenous status from 1998-2014. Figures reveal that although steady progress is being made in achieving parity between Indigenous and non Indigenous Year 12 attainment levels, there is still some way to go. Scholarship programs are cited as one of a number of measures aimed at supporting First Australian young people, especially those from remote communities, to increase engagement and retention in education (Australian Government 2016).
Since 2006, the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP), established under the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000, has operated to facilitate access for First Australian students to attend fee-paying schools. At much the same time, various independent scholarship organisations were established for the same purpose (AIEF 2015, Yalari 2016, Mary McKillop Foundation 2016, The Smith Family 2016). These non-profit organisations claim significant success for recipients of their boarding school and residential college scholarships. The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) claims that it ‘opens doors for marginalised Indigenous students to access high-quality education in culturally inclusive environments, giving them the tools and confidence to take full advantage of the opportunities before them’ (AIEF 2015).

**Boarding schools in Australia**

There are approximately 180 boarding schools in Australia, of which 149 operate within the Independent schools’ sector, and of that subset 134 have some Indigenous students enrolled (Independent Schools Council of Australia 2014). In 2015, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students totalled 200,563, and made up 5.3% of total enrolments in Australia’s schools. The majority of these students (84.0%) attended government schools, while 10.4% attended Catholic schools, and 5.5% attended Independent schools (ABS 2016). During 2015 around 5,700 First Australian secondary students received...
ABSTUDY Away from Home benefits (Commonwealth Government 2017). In the same year, AIEF supported 524 students from 259 communities in every state and territory (AIEF 2015). In 2016, Yalari supported 163 scholarship recipients from 88 communities across regional, rural and remote communities across Australia (Yalari 2016).

The key participants involved in this study all attended or had children who attended boarding schools in the Independent or Catholic boarding school sector. All of them were scholarship holders, and all received additional funding from the Federal Government.

Boarding schools cater for a broad range of students; while some are part of the elite schools’ market, others cater for a wider clientele, and still others have been established to meet the education needs of specific populations. This is particularly the case for First Australian students from remote areas where one of the major barriers to achieving educational outcomes is access to secondary schooling. In response to this need, the Federal Government has developed a range of programs to support boarders from these communities. These include individual scholarships to metropolitan schools, which are the subject of this study.

Parental choice is a recurring theme in the education debate in Australia, but for parents from remote Australia, choice is limited both by financial and geographic constraints (Mander 2015, Martin 2014). In various parts of Australia, boarding school is the only option for secondary school students: young people from Cape York, for example, have no access to local secondary schools and approximately 500 First Australian students leave home to attend boarding schools either in Queensland or further afield (Stewart 2015). The Wilson Review of education in the Northern Territory recommended that all secondary education for students from remote communities should progressively be delivered in an urban boarding setting (Wilson 2014, p22). Despite this recommendation, Wilson concedes that the Northern Territory Department of Education collects no information on outcomes of government school students leaving the system to attend boarding schools (p147).

The policy priority of sending young people from remote communities away to board for their secondary schooling, and rhetoric around the success of this approach, is not
supported by strong and independently evaluated data. In its Interim Report to Parliament on improving educational opportunities for First Australian students (2016), the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs found that in 2014, Federal government ABSTUDY benefits were paid to 200 boarding schools on behalf of 4,300 Indigenous students. Of these, approximately one third of students in ‘formal boarding arrangements’ moved on and off payments during the academic year. The Committee accepted this as evidence that ‘while many students thrive in the boarding school environment, some do not’ (p7). In some settings, the lack of opportunity for place-based, quality secondary education has been attributed with contributing to social dysfunction (Department of Education and Training 2016).

Rationale and presumed benefits of boarding schools

- Rationale and presumed benefit of boarding for all students

Boarding schools have a long tradition of providing unique and holistic learning environments. A number of authors describe them as ‘total institutions’. The central feature of total institutions is that there is a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating the three spheres of life: sleep, play, and work (Sommerlad 1976, p6). This creates opportunity for building human and social capital, but also raises inevitable issues of how the institution works to shape students’ identities, values, tastes and ambitions.

In England and America, boarding schools are associated with the cultivation and cross-generational reproduction of privilege (Finn 2012, Duffell 2014, Martin, Papworth, Ginns & Liem 2014). Writing in the American context Finn (2012) claims:

‘Elite boarding schools endeavor to instill in their students elite-class solidarity, strong beliefs in both meritocracy and the essential rightness of the status quo, and practical political know-how. Each of these objectives is wholly compatible with the self-interest of their students and their families’(p57).

By contrast, Australian boarding schools, even those metropolitan schools that maintain elite British Public School traditions, are primarily designed to meet the practical needs of school families, or to offer Australian educational opportunities to overseas, typically Asian, students (Martin et al. 2014, Cree 2000, Papworth 2014). Cree lists a series of
objectives underlying participation in Australian boarding (see Figure 2).

These objectives fall into the categories of access; opportunity; social advancement or reproduction of privilege; deficits at home; or education continuity. In some situations, the author claims that boarding schools are better placed to offer holistic care than would be available to students in their family of origin. Whereas schools running boarding houses for adolescents are always acting in loco parentis, Cree suggests a special standard of care attaches to students from difficult family circumstances.

In their research, Hodges Sheffield & Ralph (2016, p1045) explore whether it is justified to conceptualise the boarding house as a ‘home away from home’. They found evidence to support that proposition. They emphasise the importance of the boarding environment in the social, emotional and personal development of boarders. They find that a lack of empirical research in the field meant that both staff training and boarder education appeared to be guided by staff anecdotal experiences. These informed staff selection, training and governance of boarding schools. To the extent that staff act in loco parentis,
they found there was limited understanding of what this entails in real terms (p1045). Adolescent participants in their study noted that, in general, they did not consider that the boarding environment offered them sufficient emotional support. The authors conclude that this is of concern, given evidence which shows that a lack of supportive relationships at home are more likely to result in ‘poor adolescent outcomes such as decreased self-esteem, self-efficacy and in the development of internalising disorders such as anxiety and depression (Bagley et al. 2001, Bandura 2000, 2001, Millikan et al. 2002, Ohannessian et al. 1995, Sawyer et al. 2001, Shortt et al. 2006, Hodges et al. 2016).

Former boarder, boarding house master and psychotherapist Duffell (2014) has written extensively on the experience of boarding in the United Kingdom and concludes:

‘Boarding children invariably construct a survival personality that endures long after school and operates strategically. On rigid timetables, in rule-bound institutions, they must be ever alert to staying out of trouble. Crucially, they must not look unhappy, childish or foolish - in any way vulnerable - or they will be bullied by their peers. So they dissociate from all these qualities, project them out on to others, and develop duplicitous personalities’ (p10).

For First Australian boarding school students, questions of cultural and social identity add layers of complexity to an already psychologically complex education landscape (Mander 2012, p243).

- Presumed benefit of boarding for disadvantaged students

Bass (2014) provides an analysis of the objectives underlying boarding programs for disadvantaged or lower SES groups in America. She argues that because the structure of boarding or residential schools provides an opportunity for schools to exercise control over large part of the student’s day, they are able to create structures and offer the supports students need to achieve academic success. She goes further to suggest that where students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, schools can shield students from negative outside influences such as drugs or gang culture (p18). She cites the school as providing a range of programs including ‘the breadth and depth of their course choices, a wide variety of extracurricular activities and club offerings, opportunities to travel, a culturally and geographically diverse student body, exposure to the wisdom and
knowledge they gain from having closer relationships with their teachers’ (p26). She concludes that ‘Capable students who come from homes that are unsupportive or not conducive to learning are ideal for the boarding school environment’ (p28). She later qualifies this statement finding that for ‘African American students or other students from high poverty populations’ separation from home culture ‘may pose an insurmountable obstacle’ because of the relational dimension of their home culture. She also cites lateral violence when they return home as meaning that for some students ‘the boarding school environment may not be the most appropriate alternative’ (p31).

Presumed benefit of boarding for Indigenous students

In the contemporary Australian context, Beneveniste, Dawson & Rainbird (2015) identify two objectives as underpinning the goals and intended outcomes of one urban residential program for remote Aboriginal students. One major goal is that students be able to ‘walk in two (both) worlds’ (p165); the second is that ‘they should become ‘self-determining’ through the development of self and identity and critical thinking skills’ (p166).

The rhetoric of ‘walking in two worlds’ (AIEF 2015), or ‘orbiting between two worlds and enjoying the best of both’ (Pearson 2011b, p331), is often cited as justifying boarding school programs for First Australian youth, although until now this has been largely untested by research (Biddle & Rogers 2015). Despite the fact that First Australian students come from diverse geographic, socio-economic, language and cultural backgrounds, the different skill sets that might be required for students from heterogeneous backgrounds to ‘walk in two worlds’ have not attracted significant attention from those who look to boarding schools to ensure education ‘success’. Broad objectives cited in policy discourse do little to differentiate between students from urban, regional and remote home settings.

In relation to education pathways available to young people living in remote settings, policy makers have an expressed preference for sending students away to boarding school for their secondary years (Wilson, 2014). Wilson’s review of education in the Northern Territory proposes that secondary education should be delivered in urban schools. The report recommends that schools should be required to ‘review and adapt their
arrangements for Indigenous students’ to ensure that the needs of those young people are met (p24). This includes reviewing school curricula; the provision of transition and wellbeing support including engaging Indigenous staff; the establishment of effective communication strategies with parents and home communities, and transparent review and accountability procedures (p24). Literature does not describe whether or how high-performing city boarding schools might commit to ‘reviewing’ or ‘adapting’ school practice to ensure the cultural safety or wellbeing of First Australian students.

For schools, students and families to have a shared understanding of the objectives of Indigenous programs is an obvious ideal, but evidence suggests that it is not always realised. AIEF acknowledges that in many boarding schools, Indigenous programs have ‘developed organically’, often through ‘trial and error’ (AIEF 2015, p26). It proposes two different models that underpin programs in their partner schools. In the first of these, schools dedicate themselves to helping ‘students facing significant challenges’ to overcome those challenges. The second positions the school’s effort in narrative that identifies the potential for excellence in a group of students, and ‘dedicates itself to providing an opportunity for them to realise that potential’ (p26). The author acknowledges that whichever narrative underpins schools’ programs, it will flow over into the school community and influence how First Australian students see themselves, as well as how they are seen by their peers. There is no acknowledgement of the impact of deficit frameworks on students’ motivation, engagement or self-concept (Sarra 2011, Fforde et al. 2013, Bamblett 2015, Hattie 2009).

The compensatory potential of boarding schools has long been recognised. In an early modern study of the experience of Aboriginal students boarding at Kormilda College in Darwin, Sommerlad (1976) examines the claim that the school signified ‘the way to tomorrow’ for students from remote communities in the Northern Territory. She found that Kormilda was established on a compensatory ideal: people looked to the school to act as an agent of change and a means of investing ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘culturally

\[4\] Kormilda was the first residential college to be established in the Northern Territory, taking its first intake of students in 1967. The young people the subject of Sommerlad’s study had been socialised into traditional cultures markedly different from that of the dominant society.
deprived’ groups with the aptitudes and attitudes necessary for school success (p2). Sommerlad argues that when schools have to ‘compensate’ for things that are missing in the family, students are therefore looked at through a deficit lens. She argues that when education initiatives fail to enhance self-identity, or build on a student’s existing social and cultural capital, they leave young people conflicted, in a state of confusion and doubt: marginal members of two societies. Her findings are supported by contemporary scholarship to the extent that research on the prevalence and social impact of deficit discourse indicates a significant link between discourse surrounding indigeneity and outcomes for indigenous peoples (Nairn et al. 2006, Shields, Bishop & Mazawi 2005, Fforde et al. 2013, Bamblett 2015, Sarra 2011).

Assumptions of deficit may undermine the very benefits that boarding schools are presumed to deliver. Consistent with Sommerlad’s earlier study, Beneveniste et al find that in a program expressly developed to benefit young people from remote and very remote communities, staff often failed to acknowledge the social and cultural capital that students brought with them to school. The program therefore did not integrate or build on students’ prior knowledge or skills. The authors conclude that the degree of structure and dominance of mainstream skill development raised the question of how the program was able ‘to incorporate or acknowledge aspects of the ‘other’ world’ (p168). The highly structured life in boarding school was also not conducive to students being proactive and independent in decision making. In relation to the development of identity, the authors find that due to complex cultural and family ties, young Aboriginal people will understand who they are and their roles in the family from a very early age’ (p168). They point to the importance of personal and cultural continuity and the ‘high costs’ associated with not meeting youth identity-securing requirements (Chandler & Lalonde 2009, Indigenous Elders 2014, Cohler 1982).

Biddle & Rogers (2015) also identify the ability to ‘walk in two worlds’ as a presumed benefit of attending boarding school, but point to the lack of research on the impact of boarding school on social connectedness at home or in the dominant social settings. They suggest that experiencing lateral violence at home, as well as never really fitting in at a non Indigenous urban or regional school where they are in a small minority, may impact First Australian students and leave them ‘stuck in the middle’ of two worlds.
By contrast, education providers and funders make extensive claims about the benefits for First Australian students of attending high-performing schools. Prepared for philanthropists and ‘based on interviews with subject matter experts’ across the Indigenous education sector, Table 1 (below) summarises the ‘key success factors of different educational interventions currently in operation in Australia’ (Doyle & Hill 2008). Doyle and Hill’s report, published in 2008 by the philanthropic sector, identifies the benefits of educating First Australian students in high-expectation boarding schools as:

- improve literacy, numeracy, school attendance and retention to Year 12;
- facilitate secondary to tertiary transition;
- heighten aspirations for the future;
- foster better cross-cultural understanding.

While the authors assert that ‘Scholarships’ literally and metaphorically tick all the boxes to set First Australian students up for education success, there has been very little quantitative or qualitative research to verify that boarding schools live up to the potential identified by Doyle & Hill. Neither has there been any research exploring how boarding schools work for students from different social, cultural, linguistic and geographic backgrounds. The heterogeneity of First Australian students in boarding schools is reflected amongst participants in this study and discussed in subsequent chapters, but has attracted almost no research attention to date.

The extent to which high-performing boarding schools might mitigate educational disadvantage for First Australian students has captured the imagination of both government and the philanthropic sector. This is borne out in dollars and cents: AIEF’s 2016 Annual Report reveals that the organisation has raised $129 million dollars since 2008 (AIEF 2016). The corporate sector is equally committed to supporting scholarship programs: one example is the financial contribution of BHP Billiton. In 2013 the company reported that it had invested $16.3 million in scholarships (BHP Billiton 2013). Notwithstanding this is big business, and inevitably draws government and private sector investors away from place-based education initiatives, to date there has been little high-quality evaluation of the programs that are claimed to be effective in changing outcomes for these young people.
Table 1: Key Success Factors by Intervention Type Source: (Doyle and Hill 2008)

- Actual outcomes of Indigenous students in boarding schools

There are currently no contemporary, independently evaluated, Australian data to definitively answer the question of whether attending a boarding school has positive or
negative effects for First Australian students (Biddle & Rogers 2015). While scholarship providers claim vastly improved rates of school retention, the retrospective funding model endorsed by at least one major provider means that students who drop out during the course of the school year may not be included in published figures (AIEF 2015). Clarity around this issue would be helpful in understanding the trajectory of all holders of Indigenous scholarship places in boarding schools, whether or not schools have received payments pursuant to the terms of their endowment. Equally, scholarship providers do not report on the life outcomes of students who leave boarding school before the end of Year 12: whether they return to their community of origin; whether they re-engage with education; whether their general health and social and emotional wellbeing has been improved or damaged by their school experience. These are issues of particular significance given the potentially heightened vulnerability of that population (Schwab 2012). There is evidence to suggest that First Australian students who complete Year 12 attain lower tertiary entrance scores than their non Indigenous peers and that the gap between Indigenous and non Indigenous students in terms of school outcomes as opposed to school completion can still widen in the latter years of school (Biddle & Cameron 2012). Biddle & Cameron point out that ‘this has implications for future education prospects, which in turn can impact on economic and social wellbeing across the life course’ (p7).

One source of international evidence emerges from the five-day-a-week SEED schools in America, which claim to be ‘America’s only urban boarding school for the poor’ (Curto & Fryer 2014). Curto & Fryer find that ‘attending a SEED school increases achievement’ but that ‘the effects may be driven by female students’. Similarly, Dobbie & Fryer (2013) find that high-performing charter schools can significantly increase the test scores of poor urban students. The approach taken in these schools is premised on the assumption that one must improve conditions in both communities and schools in order to have a long-

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5 The SEED schools are boarding schools serving disadvantaged students located in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Miami. The schools integrate "a rigorous academic program with a nurturing boarding program, which teaches life skills and provides a safe and secure environment." The students live in campus dormitories during the week in order to provide students with a uniform residential experience (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SEED_Foundation).
term impact on outcomes for disadvantaged youth (Dobbie 2011). By studying students six years after their admission to a high-performing school, they found that admitted females were less likely to be pregnant, and admitted males were less likely to be incarcerated (Dobbie & Fryer 2013). Given the high incidence of teen pregnancy and incarceration amongst First Australian youth reported in Chapter 1, these findings are significant.

- Understanding the impact of gender on student outcomes

It is worth noting that important differences are apparent in the educational engagement patterns of First Australian boys and girls (Biddle and Cameron 2012), but also the discrepancy in opportunities available by gender.

In its interim report into improving education opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the House of Representative Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (2016) expressed concern at gender inequity between the educational opportunities available for boys and for girls. They observed that in the 2014 financial year, an additional $13.4 million of Commonwealth funding was allocated to the creation of new programs which would work to benefit 6,000 boys, whereas equivalent programs for girls were ‘starkly lacking’ (p20). Through various foundations (Clontarf, AFL), the Australian Rules Football community provides pathways and leadership training opportunities that are not currently available to girls, although broadly equivalent programs (for example The Stars Foundation) are emerging to support the educational outcomes of young women attending school in their own communities. In terms of boarding places available by gender, it is difficult to determine the percentage of First Australian students in boarding schools by gender, although in its 2015 Annual Report, AIEF reported that 37% of their students were female, and 63% were male (p17).

The cultural acceptance of teen pregnancy means that many Indigenous girls choose parenthood over education (Independent Schools Victoria 2010). Consistent with this, Biddle and Yap (2010) find that females still tend to take on a greater role with respect to child care within the community and unpaid work in general. This may impact their engagement and commitment to education, as accepted gender roles potentially play an
important role in shaping education decisions. That said, a range of factors are likely to come into play in the decision-making process. In their study into factors influencing Indigenous education, Biddle & Cameron (2012) conclude:

‘… a consistent finding is that there is a much steeper gradient for females for many of the well-being measures analysed. Put this another way, Indigenous females may need to have a higher level of education than Indigenous males to experience the same level of well-being. If this is causal, and Indigenous females take this into account when making education decisions, this may be a reason for that generally higher levels of education participants amongst Indigenous females’ (p14).

This study does not seek to establish causality, but to the extent that findings reveal differential outcomes of participants by gender, they make a useful contribution to the literature.

Understanding the differentiated schools market in Australia

As explained in Chapter 1, Indigenous scholarship programs are generally driven by a social justice agenda, and this has implications for schools, scholarship holders, their families and communities. To the extent that they are silent in acknowledging structural impediments that students may encounter in affluent schools, scholarship programs run the risk of replicating or condoning asymmetries of power that have historically worked to oppress First Australians (Hassim, Graham & McKinley 2016). To fully appreciate the narratives recounted in the chapters that follow, it is necessary to understand something of the sociological context of boarding schools in Australia.

The schools in this study sit within a sharply differentiated education landscape. They are part of a multi-tiered education system that delivers vastly different outcomes for its constituents (Kenway 2013, Savage 2013, Connell 2010). Across Australia more than one third of students attend non-Government (Catholic or ‘Independent’) schools (Figure 3)
Three powerful and sometimes competing interest groups; the State, the Catholic and the Independent sectors, each play an important role in provision of education in this country. Within this paradigm, the opportunity for students to make the most of the education system is determined in no small part by socio-economic status (SES) and by the capacity of families to exploit options within schooling system (Teese & Polesel 2003, p12). Add to this the compounding effect of educating children such that their milieu is limited to those with like social and cultural capital (Connell 2010, pp6-7), and the result is a perfect storm which over time cements inter-generational patterns of social division according to class (Connell 2010, pp101, 289). International literature confirms that peer effect has an influence on students’ outcomes and that students benefit from studying alongside high-achieving peers. While it is inconclusive about whether high- or low-ability students benefit most from abler peers, a number of studies find that the strongest relationship for own-achievement growth is for low-achieving students studying in heterogeneous classrooms (Kiss 2013, Lavy 2011, Imberman 2012).

For many First Australians, the barriers to educational participation and achievement are amplified: not only do they face the difficulties and trauma associated with being a ‘subset of [the] wider problem’ of society’s ‘persistent failure to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and disadvantaged schools on the one hand and the wider school population on the other’ (Pearson 2011a, p23), they also have to live with the
assumption that their cultural knowledge base has little currency in a ‘society where whiteness is positioned as normative, [and] everyone is ranked and categorized in relation to this racial norm’ (Ladson-Billings 1998, p9).

Geography also matters: students from urban schools generally outperform those studying in rural or remote schools (Teese & Polesel 2003). Further, students from low socio-economic and/or Indigenous backgrounds are over-represented in statistics measuring early school leaving and poor performance in numeracy and literacy outcomes (Gray & Beresford 2008, Biddle 2011, Gonski 2011). By contrast, twenty-five years of research suggests that students attending Catholic or Independent schools outperform their state school peers in Year 12 completion and performance, and that the advantages they offer are particularly significant for students from minority groups or disadvantaged social backgrounds (Ryan & Watson 2009). Marks’ (2015) study of tertiary entrance performance showed that students attending Catholic or Independent schools performed significantly better than their government school counterparts. He postulates that this may reflect non-government schools having more resources, higher expectations, better teachers, stronger discipline, or a more rigorous curriculum in the latter years of secondary school or a combination of all of these factors.

Research into higher education participation in the UK and the US confirms that students from disadvantaged backgrounds derive most benefit from being educated in elite institutions (Marginson 2015).

To the extent that school sector drives differences in participation and achievement, this presents a particular barrier to First Australian students, although scholarship programs are seeking to redress this situation.

- ICSEA and the profile of participants in this study

A range of factors, both subjective to students’ own lives, and inherent in the schools they attend, influence students’ educational outcomes. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) created an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) in order to enable meaningful comparisons of test achievement by students in schools across Australia as measured by the National
Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). The Federal Government’s My School web site justifies and explains ICSEA saying:

‘Key factors in students’ family backgrounds (parents’ occupation, school education and non-school education) have an influence on students’ educational outcomes at school. In addition to these student-level factors, research has shown that school-level factors (a school’s geographical location and the proportion of Indigenous students a school caters for) need to be considered when summarising educational advantage or disadvantage at the school level’ (ACARA 2016b).

Each school attended by key informants in this study had an ISCEA value well above the national average. Typically, between 70-85% of their students fell within the top quartile on the ICSEA scale, compared to the national average of 25%. These were predominantly non-Indigenous schools in urban or regional centres, where upwards of 90% of students typically transition to university. The socio-educational advantage identified in the schools attended by key informants is important. Parents’ affluence (reflected in their occupation and the suburb where they live) and their level of educational attainment are known to have a major influence on the education attainment of their children (Redmond, Wong, Bradbury & Katz 2014). By contrast, all participants in this study were disadvantaged according to family socio-educational background; whether they came from urban, regional, remote or very remote communities, every participant in this study fell in the lowest quartile on the ICSEA scale.

Choice and equity in enabling access to quality education

In a study published in 2010, Perry & McConney (2010) subjected Australia’s 2003 PISA data set to secondary analysis to better understand the combined impact on students of the socio-economic profile of their school and individual student SES. It is well established in the educational research literature that SES of individual students is strongly associated with educational achievement as measured by standardised assessment systems (OECD 2004, as cited by Perry et al. 2010, p73). Similarly, previous

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6 PISA is the ‘The Program for International Student Assessment’. It compares the performance of 15-year-old students internationally using the same assessment tasks. PISA helps governments to measure the effectiveness of their education systems and also to learn from practices in other countries.
studies had found that school socio-economic composition is a strong predictor of student academic achievement in many countries (OECD 2004, Rumberger & Palardy 2005, Sirin 2005, as cited by Perry et al. 2010). Other studies confirm that academic school quality has ‘a considerable differential effect’ on school completion and that this is more important for the most vulnerable students (Biddle & Cameron 2012, Dobbie & Fryer 2013).

In 2010, the then Federal Minister for Education, Julia Gillard MP, initiated what later became known as the Gonski Review of funding for schooling. The committee was charged with devising a funding model that would redress the inequities described here. Their final report concludes that a fair and equitable education system is ‘one of the most powerful levers to make society more equitable’ and that ‘there is a human rights imperative for all people to develop their capacities and participate fully in society’ (2011, p107). In considering factors of disadvantage they refer to a growing body of evidence;

‘that demonstrates that the composition of the school's population has a significant impact on the outcomes achieved by all students at school. This is particularly significant in Australia in light of evidence that some parts of the schooling system are becoming increasingly stratified according to socioeconomic status’ (p111).

In her article ‘Challenging inequality in Australian schools: Gonski and beyond’, Kenway picks up on Gonski’s acknowledgement that social and educational segregation is a powerful factor in undermining the performance of low-achievers. She expresses some frustration that the report did not challenge more directly the hegemony of the independent school sector both in terms of funding arrangements but also for the homogeneity of school populations (Kenway 2013, p13).

Kenway echoes those commentators who argue that an education market which ‘rests on a rhetoric of school autonomy and parental freedom of choice’ will inevitably work to the benefit of those ‘most inclined to engage with the market and best skilled to exploit it to their children’s advantage’ (Gerwirtz 1995, p189). To this extent, schools become sites, as Bourdieu suggests, for the reproduction of social inequalities, where social advantage or disadvantage is compounded. Bourdieu (1973) argues that ‘the hierarchy of the education establishments’;
‘correspond exactly … to the social structure of their public, on account of the fact that those classes or sections of the class which are richest in cultural capital become more and more over-represented as there is an increase in the rarity and hence the educational value and social yield of academic qualifications’ (p286).

The differentiated schools market in Australia, coupled with literature that establishes the positive impact of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds studying alongside high-performing peers, go some way to explaining why government, the private sector and the media increasingly seem to see boarding school as a ‘silver bullet’ to redress disparities between Indigenous and non Indigenous educational performance.

Human capital and identifying the cost/benefit of education

While there is a compelling logic to making places available for the most disadvantaged students in the highest performing schools, there is a paucity of research on how this impacts First Australian young people in the short, medium or long term. The current study is one attempt to address this gap in the literature.

According to the Human Capital Model outlined by Becker in 1964, it is assumed that when deciding whether or not to undertake certain type of education, potential students are rational utility maximisers who, about all, see education as an investment (Becker 1964, as quoted by Biddle & Cameron 2012, p10). Such investment will be primarily inspired by the extent to which it will translate into economic advantage.

In his assessment of the education marginalisation of Indigenous Australians, Biddle (2010) applies a human capital approach in seeking to understand why so few First Australians invest in education notwithstanding the return, in social and economic terms, would justify the investment. He identifies a discrepancy between the ‘relatively large benefits of education for the Indigenous population in terms of employment probabilities and income’ that would flow from education and the ‘historical and contemporary low rate of attendance and completion’ that characterise Indigenous education in this country (p14). He identifies three factors in answering this conundrum: firstly he finds that First Australians are participating in education, but at a much later stage in life than other
Australians; second, he identifies high economic, social and cultural costs associated with education for First Australian young people; and third, he finds that First Australian children start school with a lower bank of social and cultural capital ‘as valued in the formal education system’, making education ‘more difficult and more costly to these children’ (p15).

Subjective personal experience works powerfully within any structured environment to limit the extent to which an individual can fully avail themselves of the opportunities on offer (Noddings 2006, p17). This is one example of what Evans (2007) describes as ‘bounded agency’ (p92). Evans argues that, in highly structured environments, opportunities are open only for those following clearly defined routes. She studied young people from England, West Germany and East Germany over a twelve-year period in the years following reunification of Germany. She found that young people from East Germany, who were thrown into a new world order with the fall of the Berlin Wall, required flexibility and needed to adapt to new ways of thinking. These young people were more likely to blame themselves for failures in education or the labour market than those who ‘knew the system’ and had developed internal frames of reference that helped them negotiate the world around them. She cautions that societies ‘need to ensure that the greatest demands to ‘take control of their lives’ do not fall on those who are the least powerfully placed in the social landscape they inhabit’ (p93).

Given the interconnection between social and cultural background and a person’s ability to maximise return on educational investment (Bourdieu 1986, p282), any attempt to invest First Australian students with western social, cultural and educational capital must take into account the associated cost to them of participation in the mainstream (Becker 1964, Biddle & Cameron 2012, Evans 2007, Indigenous Elders 2014). Assumptions that high-performing schools necessarily enable First Australian students to maximise their return on education need to be tested.

Link between health and education outcomes for First Australian students

Although it is well-recognised that education is one of the social determinants of Indigenous health (Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet 2016, Zubrick et al. 2006, Gee
2016, Anderson 2007), the policy implications of this are not well understood (Anderson, 2007). Ewald & Boughton (2002) contend that:

For [First Australians] there are issues of language, culture and power embedded in the history of their relationships with the dominant settler majority which make the education system’s health effects more complex and difficult to unravel (Ewald & Boughton 2002, p7, as quoted in Dunbar 2007).

Insufficient research attention has been paid to the relationship between time spent at boarding school and health and wellbeing outcomes for First Australian students. Whereas the potentially detrimental impacts of Western education on the social and emotional well-being of Indigenous people is an area of research interest more generally (Dunbar 2007), this literature does not currently inform understandings of ‘best practice’ in Australian boarding schools. Education is a social determinant of health, but the opposite is also true: health and emotional wellbeing is a social determinant of education success for First Australian students.

Zubrick et al. (2013) show that the social determinants of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal people include such things as socioeconomic status and the impact of poverty, unemployment, housing, educational attainment, racial discrimination, exposure to violence, trauma and stressful life events, and access to community resources. These social determinants do not occur in isolation, but rather impact health and wellbeing ‘concurrently and cumulatively’ (Gee 2016). Sometimes the prevalence of these factors in community is used as justification for sending Indigenous young people away to boarding school (Albrechtsen 2016). The implication is that boarding school students achieve better life and education outcomes than the ones left behind. Less attention is drawn to the diminution of educational social capital in communities where the best and brightest are sent away to boarding schools. For those left behind, education outcomes are presumably also diminished. As will be discussed below, one limitation of this study is that it does not address that issue.

Coupled with school-based support and mental health literacy, education is a known protective factor against youth suicide (Dudgeon, Milroy, Calma & colleagues 2016). Whether this is true for young people in boarding schools has not been tested. Equally,
teaching culture in schools and connecting young people to culture, country and elders are all factors known to lessen the risk of suicide and therein lies some complexities for the boarding school sector.

There are several imperatives that suggest that boarding school might have a greater than usual impact on student wellbeing. First is the intensive nature of boarding school life: while this provides opportunities for academic support, extra-curricular programs and constant immersion in a learning environment (Bass 2014), for key participants in this study it also meant spending forty weeks a year, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, as a small minority in a dominant cultural setting. To the extent that social determinants already identified as detrimental to health outcomes for Indigenous people manifest in schools in general, these are amplified by the boarding experience (Schaverien 2004).

- **Social determinants of health: racism**

Ensuring that schools are culturally safe places for First Australian boarders is fundamental to their wellbeing. In particular, racism is known to have a negative association with health outcomes for Indigenous people (Paradies 2007) but research suggests that racism is an ever-present reality for many Indigenous students in Australian schools (Brown 2013, Bin-Sallik 2003, Sarra 2011). The prevalence and impact of deficit discourse is one expression of racism particularly important to First Australian students from non-materially advantaged backgrounds living and studying in affluent and highly academic school environments (Fforde et al. 2013).

Mander’s research into the transition experiences to boarding school for male Aboriginal secondary school students from regional and remote communities across Western Australia finds that issues such as stereotypes, prejudice and covert racism require further research attention and have implications for education policy and practice in that state (Mander 2012, p249). Similarly, participants in Rogers’ study describe experiencing a lack of freedom to be themselves, cultural ignorance being shown by teachers and students and the disconnection between the ways of home and the ways of school (2015). Understanding how racism, including interpersonal, institutional, and internalised racism
manifests in high-performing boarding schools, is pertinent to this study.

- **Social determinants of health: social connectedness**

A second issue facing boarding school students is that Indigenous social connectedness is recognised as a protective factor in health and wellbeing outcomes (Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart & Kelly 2014, Gee 2016, Anderson 2007). Understanding how leaving home to attend boarding school impacts social connectedness, and participants’ access to capital as expressed through social networks, may have reciprocal implications for health, wellbeing and education outcomes.

Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart & Kelly (2014) devised the diagram reproduced as Figure 4 (below) as a tool with which to discuss social and emotional wellbeing that helps to recognise cultural differences and the impacts of historical, political and social determinants on the wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples. According to this model, between self and the outside world are a web of connections that act as protective factors, buffering the individual and anchoring them within their community. This raises the question of how important social connections, with home, family, community, and culture, can be maintained for young people studying in predominantly non-Indigenous schools.

![Determinants of Social and Emotional Wellbeing](image)

**Figure 4** Determinants of Social and Emotional Wellbeing (Gee 2016, p21).
Although the enthusiastic uptake of modern technology and on-line media in remote communities (Kral & Schwab 2012) enables boarding students a degree of connection to home, by definition boarding school physically separates students from their families and communities for significant periods of time. Perhaps more significant than physical separation is the fact that Indigenous students readily admit to being changed by their time at boarding school (Biddle & Rogers 2015). This has implications for how schools and communities work together to mitigate the negative impact of such changes.

Understanding social connectedness is important to both health and education outcomes. How this impacts relationships at home, and the degree to which young people’s social connectedness is affected by the transformative aspects of boarding school, has not been described in the literature.

- ‘Outsider’ status at school

While it may be assumed that facilitating access to mainstream schools is a way of breaking down entrenched social barriers, this does not go without saying. Students whose background and cultural knowledge is not recognised or acknowledged, can internalise a sense of ‘otherness’ that is a disincentive to engagement (Hattie 2009, p57, Pearson 2011b, p23; Yosso 2005).

Critical Race theorists argue that assumptions of cultural superiority shape the approach of schools in working with students whose race and cultural background are presumed to ‘have left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital’ to enable social mobility (Yosso 2005, p70). Although some First Australian students may avail themselves of the opportunities offered at school to develop skills they deem essentially euro-centric, others actively avoid doing so (Brown 2013).

Portes (1998) notes that where the social mobility of a particular group has been blocked by outside discrimination for a lengthy period of time, often lasting generations, the common experience of subordination gives rise to an oppositional stance towards the mainstream (p17). Both in American (Ogbu 2003, Harper 2015) and Australian (Beresford 2012) schools this is reflected in those students who see non-participation in education as a form of resistance.
Cultural hybridity and ‘outsider’ status at home

Gee (2016) describes connectedness within the frame of country, culture and home community. By contrast, First Australian youth who have been educated away from their home environments may experience the special pain of being an outsider not only at school but also in their own community (Biddle & Rogers 2015).

Useem & Useem (1957) coined the phrase *third culture* in the 1950s. Their work describes an interstitial or ‘third culture’ that exists in the shared communalities of the expatriate lifestyle (Pollock & Van Reken 2009). While they identify a number of benefits to viable third culture settings, there are also serious issues for those who live and work in a space that does not allow for a strong sense of belonging in either their home or their host environments. Pollock and Van Reken (2009) find that for the children of these people, consequences are amplified: where a cross-cultural experience occurs during the years when a child’s sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world are being formulated, the experience can have profoundly disorienting consequences.

Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) describes this as cultural hybridity. Consistent with Sommerlad’s (1976) findings for students at Kormilda College, Bhabha argues that people who live between two worlds run the risk that they are neither one thing nor the other: they are not fully recognised or accepted either in the dominant cultural world or in their community of origin. For some, this results in them becoming internally divided and losing any compelling sense of self.

Where a small number of students are selected for special education opportunities, this may have ramifications for their sense of belonging at home. This is true both in the short term as they pursue their education, and in the longer run as their different standard of living reflects the opportunities they have been given and the investment that they have made in self-development. Exposure to the wider world and different attitudes to materialism and individual ownership, concepts of time, competition, leisure, a different ethic around the priority of work over relationship, and other culturally embedded norms (Mejudhon 1997, Russell 2008) all serve to differentiate those who have left from those who have stayed. Some First Australian boarding students report that this has complicated their position within their home community to the extent that it is easier not to return home (Rogers 2015).
For those who do return, the literature suggests that they face a difficult conundrum. Portes (1998) acknowledges that while the sociological bias is to see good things emerging out of the accumulation of individual human and social capital, in some instances it produces less desirable consequences. In situations in which group solidarity is cemented by a common experience of adversity and opposition to mainstream society, Portes argues that individual success stories undermine group cohesion. He describes the impact of ‘downward levelling norms’ (p17); these are patterns of conduct that work to keep downtrodden groups in place. More socially mobile members of the group have a choice to either conform or escape. This phenomenon is widely described in relation to Latino communities in the US. Portes observes that typically the emergence of downward leveling norms has been preceded by lengthy periods, often lasting generations, in which the mobility of a particular group has been blocked by outside discrimination.

Lateral Violence

Insofar as downward levelling norms impact the First Australian alumni of boarding schools, one explanation is the prevalence of lateral violence in their home communities. Lateral violence can be defined and explained as:

‘The organised, harmful behaviours that we do to each other collectively as part of an oppressed group: within our families; within our organisations and; within our communities. When we are consistently oppressed we live with great fear and great anger and we often turn on those who are closest to us’ (AHRC 2011, p52).

In the Australian Human Rights Commissions’ Social Justice report of 2011, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner, Mick Gooda, observed the extensive harm done to First Australian communities and individuals by the prevalence of lateral violence. He explains lateral violence as being a ‘complex mix of historical, cultural and social dynamics that results in a spectrum of behaviours’ (p54). These include gossiping; jealousy; bullying; shaming; social exclusion; family feuding; organisational conflict; and physical violence (p54). He cautions:

‘While we continue to harm each other with lateral violence and while governments and industry operate in a way that fosters lateral violence, there will be little progress in improving the indicators that measure the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader Australian community’ (p53).
Common sense suggests that by singling select students out for special educational opportunities in high performing schools, the risk of incurring lateral violence when they return home is significant.

The degree of belonging a young person retains within their home community is potentially illustrative of either disjunctive or shared goals of families, communities and educational institutions. This has direct implications for how young people are supported between home and boarding school, but this issue has not been described in the literature. Given the importance of social connectedness described by Gee and others, strategies to develop strong relationships between school and home communities should be seen as equally important to developing a young person’s individual capabilities. Were this the case, school communities would appear on the diagram reproduced as Figure 4 as one of the buffering mechanisms between self and the outside world.

The extent to which boarding schools prioritise the need for Indigenous students to maintain social connectedness within their own community, or assist in proactively building networks within the dominant society that will endure after they have left school, has not been described in Australian literature. This research project will contribute to building understanding of whether, and if so how, boarding schools approach this issue.

Understanding 'best practice' in schools

Although twelve interviews were conducted with education professionals, an obvious limitation of this study is that it does not engage in depth with schools. This has been a conscious decision, made in part because of the publication of the ‘AIEF Compendium of best practice for achieving successful outcomes with Indigenous students in Australian boarding schools’ [The Compendium] (AIEF 2015). The Compendium was launched in May, 2015 by the then Prime Minister, Tony Abbott. Based on 84 interviews with 119 interviewees from schools around Australia, it aspires to shape and inform Indigenous programs in predominantly non Indigenous boarding schools in Australian capital cities. The scope of the work is limited: the authors declare that it is ‘not a formal academic research paper, it does not present first-hand the views of Indigenous students and their parents and it is not relevant to Indigenous only schools and boarding programs, particularly those operating in remote Australia’ (p14).
A number of participants in this study were supported by AIEF scholarships, but to the extent that it sheds light on the mindset of people working in schools more generally, the publication is useful in understanding the context that all key participants in this study described. Although the *Compendium* will be referenced in subsequent chapters, it is worth making some background comments here.

Insofar as it brings together the accumulated wisdom of experienced school leaders and staff of school Indigenous programs in predominantly non-Indigenous schools, there may be insights to be gleaned from it, but the lack of evidence base to support the publication is a fundamental flaw. In his review, Stewart (2015) observes:

> [In] the area of implementation, the Compendium provides solid and proven strategies which will work to support the Indigenous students who make it through the selection process. In the same way, the challenges that come with working with Indigenous students in boarding school environments are generally dealt with in a common sense and relatively frank manner. Distinctions are drawn between challenges that occur within the school environment and those which have their origins in students’ home communities although in practice, the line between the two can often be both blurred and confused (p209).

Stewart’s assessment here is generous given that no research or independent evaluations are cited to justify claims of how strategies work to support Indigenous students or their home communities.

Beyond the point of implementation, Stewart is less than convinced of the contribution the *Compendium* has to make:

> It is here, that what is articulated as best practice often becomes quite simplistic and reflective of the fact that rigorous screening is intended to prevent the manifestation of complex and difficult behaviours which are not ameliorated through template solutions (p209).

Privileging Indigenous voices has been described as an essential aspect of Indigenous research (Rigney 1999), but neither Indigenous students nor their parents were given the opportunity to contribute to this publication. It is ironic that the only contributor identified as Indigenous is an ‘Indigenous person in a support role at a Queensland school’ who commented:
‘Schools that really want Indigenous programs to work need to have an Indigenous person in a role of authority, and if they don't it will never work’ (p42).

Forty-nine ‘leading Australian Independent schools’ contributed to the research process (p16). It was premised on the unsubstantiated claim that these schools ‘have achieved unprecedented levels of success in Indigenous education outcomes’ and therefore have important insights to share. Insofar as the work models a pattern of non-engagement with Indigenous communities it is concerning.

It is interesting that issues such as: pedagogy; school curricula where a respect for Indigenous Australia is embedded, sequential and well integrated; naming racism and identifying successful approaches to tackling it; acknowledging Indigenous students’ prior learning or different language backgrounds (other than as a deficit to be overcome); employing First Australian staff; and understanding the impact of trauma on young people, do not merit a mention amongst key findings on critical success factors.

Success is defined in ‘precise and unambiguous’ terms (Stewart 2015) as Year 12 completion and transition to higher education or employment. This begs the question of whether other valuable outcomes from time spent at boarding school are of secondary, or indeed any, importance.

Given these shortcomings, and consistent with the findings of (Lloyd, Lewthwaite, Osbourne, & Boon 2015), there is little evidence to support the claim suggested by the title Compendium of Best Practice.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly outlined the history and place of boarding schools, and Indigenous boarding programs, within the wider education landscape in Australia. It has problematised the link between health and education as social determinants of Indigenous wellbeing. It has highlighted issues known to negatively impact Indigenous health that might also have implications for education outcomes. These will be considered in depth in subsequent chapters, and literature specific to them will be discussed then.
Chapter Three will introduce the theoretical direction and critique driving this study, and set up in detail the theoretical framework employed to determine research methods and inform the collection and analysis of data.
Chapter 3:

Theoretical Framework

According to Tuhiwai Smith (2012), social science research is based upon ideas, beliefs and theories about the social world that are culturally informed and values laden. She argues that theory is important as a means of making sense of reality. She claims that ‘theory can protect us because it contains within it a way of putting reality into perspective’ (p40). Theory informs the methods adopted by researchers, including how data is arranged, prioritised and legitimated. It helps in the interpretation of data and in ‘predicting the consequences of what is being promised’ (p40).

As a non Indigenous researcher, and as someone working within Australia’s Independent school sector, I am also the inheritor of colonial asymmetries of power that have been described in previous chapters. Tuhiwai Smith cautions:

‘… it is critical that researchers recognize the power dynamic that is embedded in the relationship with the subjects. Researchers are in receipt of privileged information. They may interpret it within an overt theoretical framework, but also in terms of a code first ideological framework. They have the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate and draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance’ (p178).

She points out (p124) that research ethics extend far beyond issues of individual consent and confidentiality. They require a research design that ensures respect, a willingness to listen, a commitment to providing research participants opportunity to approve the way in which their narratives have been interpreted and presented.

Following the discussion in Chapter 1, in laying the groundwork for this study it is necessary to engage with the threshold question of how policy makers in Australia describe the objects of the education system. If, as I will argue, they see education as important beyond the purely functional, this introduces moral and emotional dimensions
that disavow an exclusive focus on retention and completion as measures of success. The moral and emotional terrain in schools therefore takes on particular significance.

Asymmetries of power are a central issue of concern in this study. I avoid describing the schools involved as ‘elite’ schools, because a number of participants attended schools that do not fit that description. But of schools attended by key participants, all are privileged, and it would be a fiction to deny that most deserve the elite tagline, on both socio-educational and socio-economic grounds. They are direct inheritors of the colonial legacy, and far from repudiating colonial values and assumptions, they take pride in their historical roots. These are institutions that understand their privilege, and the social advantages it bestows. This is reflected in tangible and intangible ways: in school buildings; in educational experiences, which are increasingly global in their orientation; in the promise of outstanding academic results; and in a constant awareness of where the school sits in ‘league tables’. Prestige attaches to uniforms, and excites fierce loyalty not only from current students but also from the columns of alumni who march sometimes visibly, sometimes invisibly, under the school flag. The connective power of old school tie networks is well understood, and parents are willing to make significant sacrifices so that their offspring might be able to call on them as they carve out their own niche in competitive market economies.

To enlist the efforts of these schools in the fight to redress disparities of power that work persistently against First Australians is no small thing. To ask those schools to become critically aware of how asymmetries of power are expressed in their institutional culture, pedagogy and curriculum is another altogether. To question whether success should be measurable only by reference to a Western capitalist frame raises a different set of complexities for schools, communities and policy makers. This study centres squarely on how power and cultural expectations work out in the lives of minority First Australian students. These foci recommend a critical frame.

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of how education aims are understood in the Australian policy landscape, before going on to explain the critical ‘toolbox’ that informs fieldwork design, and the analysis and presentation of data used in this study. In particular, I will explain how Indigenist and Critical Race Theory are effective as lenses
through which the intersecting issues of indigeneity, race and class become visible as factors within participants’ accounts of their boarding school experiences. Further, I will explain how and why Bourdieu’s theoretical devices of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field* are useful in understanding how individuals positioned themselves vis-à-vis the different social contexts of home and school. Where Bourdieu argues that schools are efficient mechanisms for the intergenerational reproduction of social class, this study will explore what this means for First Australian scholarship holders.

Aims of education in contemporary Australian policies

The objectives and presumed benefits of Indigenous boarding programs have been discussed in preceding chapters, but it is instructive to contextualise this study in relation to the objectives of education as understood in Australia more broadly.

In Australia, the ‘Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians’ (MCEETYA 2008) sets a clear agenda for schools. The Declaration points to several key objectives of education in this country including:

- to equip young people with ‘knowledge, understanding, skills and values’;
- to enable them to ‘take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenges of this era with confidence’;
- to shape the ‘intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians’ (p4).

By developing an individual’s capacities and skills, education also ensures the nation’s ‘ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion’ (p4). The Declaration asserts that:

‘As a nation, Australia values the central role of education building a democratic, equitable and just society – a society that is prosperous, cohesive and culturally diverse, and that values Australia’s Indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation’s history, present and future’ (p4).

These aims are cast within a broad frame that sees schools as sharing responsibility with ‘students, parents, carers, families, the community, business and other education and training providers’ (p4).
The objectives articulated by the Melbourne Declaration are markedly broader than those enumerated in the Wilson Review of Education in the Northern Territory. In that document, the aim of education is reduced to a far more prosaic set of outcomes:

‘[From] the outset this review has made a pragmatic decision to focus on the skills and knowledge that underpin success in the Western education system. Some people will find this a challenging position. The review has taken as a non-negotiable that there must be an explicit focus on improving unacceptably low outcomes for Indigenous children and that this will not be achieved unless there is rigorous and relentless attention to learning English and gaining the skills that support participation in a modern democracy and economy’ (Wilson 2014, p35).

Whatever other concerns such a narrow and mono-cultural conception of education might raise, it also highlights the dichotomy between education as a means to accumulate individual human capital on the one hand, and education to build citizenship and capacity in communities on the other. Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshaw & Gunstone (2000) argue that where a young person’s sense of self is shaped by cultural markers that are cast in a collectivist frame (including kinship, understanding of history, language and the role of place), schools that prioritise personal advancement and a competitive ethic may present as ‘alien and antithetical to home values and practices’ (pix). These issues go to the very heart of understanding the lived experience of Indigenous students in mainstream boarding schools.

- Education as a public good or private good

The role education plays in respectively shaping the individual and shaping the state has been a live topic for discussion in shaping education policy. During his Prime Ministership, John Howard famously claimed that parents were moving their children out of government schools because the state system was ‘too politically correct and too values-neutral’ (Crabbe 2004). Central to the debate that ensued is the question of how education builds national identity and the determines the parameters of the nation state. In turn, this raises the question of whether education is primarily a public good, that prioritises the development of an individual’s capacity to contribute to society and to understand the rights and responsibilities of citizenry; a private good, which casts the student as a consumer, who is equipped through education to be socially mobile; or both (Labaree 1997).
While the priorities proposed by the Melbourne Declaration foresee education as providing both public and private good, many commentators bemoan the predominance of economic rationalism in education policy and practice both in Australia and overseas (Polesel 2013, Teese & Polesel 2003, Apple 2013, 2015, Noddings 2003, Guenther 2013). Labaree (1997) argues that three alternative goals underpin the American education system: *democratic equality* (where the primary focus of school is on preparing citizens), *social efficiency* (where the focus is on training workers), and *social mobility* (where schools prepare individuals to compete for social positions according to the mandates of a market economy). Labaree claims that in American education the third of these goals has come to dominate discourse and policy.

Nussbaum (2010) agrees, and she characterises the predominantly mercantile focus of Western education systems as producing a ‘silent crisis’ for citizenship. She recognises that not all education happens in the schoolroom and argues that public policy approaches must include discussion of how families can be supported in the task of developing children’s capabilities as citizens (p8). This raises particular complexities for boarding schools which are physically and culturally removed from students’ home communities. Complexity increases where the organising principles of home communities and school systems are arranged around different life priorities.

In the same vein, Noddings (2003) argues that occupational (economic) life is the primary focus of contemporary educational endeavours. She posits that success in education is increasingly measured with oblique or explicit reference to the potential earning capacity rendered by particular career paths; a ‘learn to earn’ paradigm that relegates the development of citizenship characteristics. Year 12 completion and university entrance therefore become the gold standards for education success.

By contrast, Noddings believes that the ultimate object of education is *happiness*. She argues that happiness is personal, but not limited to the individual; personal happiness is absolutely entwined with the public good. Happiness is not only for the present, but also to be secured for future life. She argues that the ‘best’ schools are those that recognise

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7 Given that ‘failure’ is the antonym to ‘success’ this has particular relevance for the participants in this study who did not complete Year 12, or who completed school but did not then follow a path perceived to be ‘the best’ or the most desirable in economic rationalist terms (Guenther 2013).
happiness as both means and ends (p261): education should help people to become their ‘best selves’ (p23). To her, happiness is closely connected to place: ‘It is neither raw pleasure nor philosophical contemplation; it is something with roots in the earth and branches in the heavens’ (p32). Her prose invites the question of where a young person studying away from home is to put down the tap root that sustains his or her emotional life? Whether leaving home at a young age, and being inculcated into a different worldview, encourages a sort of rootlessness that condemns them to being perpetual outsiders; to orbiting between two worlds, but being grounded in neither.

For people whose intrinsic connection to land is a cornerstone of identity (Schwab 2012, Bamblett 2015), and for whom community social connectedness is an indicator of social and emotional wellbeing (Gee 2016, Guenther 2015), having a clear and shared understanding of the objectives of boarding school education is important. One focus of this study is to understand the degree to which schools and the parents and communities of First Australian students, see themselves as working in cooperative partnership towards mutually understood objectives. Despite the shared responsibilities anticipated by the Melbourne Declaration, this does not go without saying.

The presumption that all stakeholders in Indigenous boarding programs at high-performing schools are striving towards the same ends should not be taken as a given. Further to the discussion in Chapter 2, boarding schools in Australia and throughout the colonised world, were historically linked to assimilatory ideals. One manifestation of this was the way high-performing schools were used as a mechanism for creating new Indigenous elites as identified by reference to Western cultural norms (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, p67). Tuhiwai Smith argues that by aligning their cultural and economic interests with the colonising majority rather than with their own communities, boarding students’ elite status was confirmed. She cautions that:

‘attempts to ‘indigenize’ colonial academic institutions and/or individual disciplines within them have been fraught with major struggles over what counts as knowledge, as language, as a literature, as curriculum and as the role of intellectuals, and over the critical function of the concept of the academic freedom’ (p68).

Of course, assimilatory ideals vary according to time and place (Fitzpatrick 2013, p141), and history confirms that the intransigence of deep-seated racism often outlives cultural
assimilation (see Clendinnen 2003). Fitzpatrick, argues that how colonial contexts have inscribed Black and Brown bodies reflects local context. She cites Mohanram (1999): ‘Black signifies differently in Uganda or South Africa than it does in Oakland, California, To Auckland, New Zealand. In each situation the signifier ‘black’ resonates with the history, culture and power dynamics that are particular to that place’ (Fitzpatrick 2013, p141). In the Australian context, assimilatory ideals were closely linked to skin colour (Neville 1937), but these could only be fully realised when education systems worked to transform the language, behaviour and demeanour of the native ‘other’.

Given this context, narrow and exclusively empirical measures of success proposed by Australian scholarship providers (AIEF 2015) and policy makers (Wilson 2014) are concerning insofar as they have the effect of marginalising the relative importance of Indigenous cultural practices and community engagement (Guenther & Bat 2013, Fogarty, Lovell & Dodson 2015). These become important only to the extent that they are tools ‘for persuading adult community members to support predefined government goals for local schools and students’ (Fogarty et al. 2015, p13). Any more nuanced and differentiated objectives of education become lost in an unwavering commitment to Year 12 completion at all costs.

What it means for an Indigenous student to succeed as an Indigenous student at Australian boarding schools is an issue that has attracted little research attention, although Sarra’s (2011) work on overcoming internalised deficit speaks directly to this issue in relation to schools more broadly. In the New Zealand context, Durie (2001) argues that:

‘To the extent that the purpose of education is to prepare people for participation in society, it needs to remembered that preparation for participation in Māori society is also required. If after twelve or so years of formal education Māori youth were totally unprepared to interact within te ao Māori, then no matter what else had been learned, education would have been incomplete’(p3).

The slim volume of literature on the contemporary experience of Indigenous students in Australian boarding schools has not tested the implications of these issues as they play out in the lived experience of young people, their families and communities.

The next section will outline the basic tenets of critical theory. A critical frame will then
be applied to the question of recognition and the claim that ‘justice’ requires not only redistribution but also explicit recognition of minority interests. This will lead into a discussion of Critical Race Theory. I will explain how this theoretical tool helps to unmask asymmetries of power which have potential to undermine the efforts of First Australian students as they strive to achieve education success as First Australian students in mainstream boarding schools.

Developing a Critical Theoretical Framework

Critical theory is a mode of discourse that describes social realities so as to transform them: by naming what is we are also enabled to imagine what could be (Young 1990, p10). One of the central tenets of critical theory is that it is both illustrative and transformative of society. It is a mechanism to see and understand the world by looking back, situating the present within the specificity of history (Young 1990, Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995); and by looking forward to provide the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms (Horkheimer 1982).

Critical theory in education research encourages an examination of how power and privilege; race, class and gender; the internal self and the external world all work in concert to create or constrain opportunity. Critical theorists hold out hope that where research interests understand and address unequal relations of power, findings can lead to emancipation and social justice for oppressed groups (Tuhiwai Smith 2012). McLaren (2009, p61) asserts that ‘critical theorists begin with the premise that man and woman are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege’ (italics in the original). McLaren acknowledges that these social conditions are more than simply ‘isolated events of individuals or deficiencies in the social structure’, but are part of an ‘interactive context between individual and society’. The critical theorist acknowledges that the individual both creates and is created by the world around them and therefore focuses simultaneously on both sides of a social contradiction. Contradiction is inherent in the colonial legacy, and an inevitable reality in mainstream schools which Nakata (2007) describes as the ‘cultural interface’, a conflicted space where ontologies and epistemologies collide, and where assumptions about the value of knowledge and knowledge systems are driven by wider social agendas. To
understand how these factors work in the life of First Australian boarders requires that we ‘reposition ourselves so that we see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed’ (Apple 2013, p39).

Because of the role schools play in actively shaping society, critical research in education is necessarily political. A critical theoretical sociologist does not work in the abstract but needs to be prepared to enter the fray:

‘Between the public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education …. The project of such [organic] public sociologies is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as part of our sociological life’ (Apple 2013, p41).

The political landscape surrounding Indigenous education in Australia is fraught. As a colonised country, asymmetries of power are embedded into the very warp and weave of Australian life. They are so normalised that when they are explicitly named, the public reaction is either disbelief or outrage. As explained in Chapter 1, the ongoing ‘History Wars’ in Australia, as in other parts of the colonised world, are one example of this (Manne 2003, Madley 2016). In this theatre of conflict, schools are on the front line. An on-going, pitched and highly politicised battle is being fought over the shape of the National Curriculum, and the priority that should be given to different historical standpoints within it (Lingard 2014). Nakata draws attention to the reality that any standpoint is by nature ‘historically rooted’ and therefore ‘can’t be anything but political’ (2012, p89). It is ironic, if not disingenuous, then that senior members of government, should in one breath called for curriculum to be seen less in political terms, and in the next announce that greater attention should be paid to the Western liberal values and ‘recognising the legacy of Western civilisation’ in the creation of an Australian national identity (Pyne 2014).

Because participants in this research name the world as they see it, the work inevitably has political implications. My awareness of this has shaped both the theoretical toolkit described here and research methods outlined in Chapter 4.
One of the tasks of the critical scholar/activist in education is to continually and publicly pull away from ‘reductionist and essentialising impulses’ and to be open to learning from ‘multiple critical traditions’ (Apple 2013, p12). Apple calls on critical scholars in education to act as ‘critical secretaries’ of the voices and struggles for those whose voices are otherwise silenced (p15). He identifies one of the primary functions of critical analysis in education as the need to ‘bear witness to negativity’ … to illuminate the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to relations of exploitation and domination’ (p41). At the same time, he cautions that unless research is to lead to ‘cynicism and despair’, negativity must be countered with a commitment to critically examining and documenting spaces where ‘more progressive and counter-hegemonic actions can, or do, go on at a level of individual experience and at the institutional level’ (p41). His injunction to even-handedness is a guiding light in this study, where the intent is to encourage opportunity for First Australian students, not to foreclose it.

The participants in this study are people whose lives are simultaneously circumscribed by historical, political, cultural, economic, educational and personal dynamics over which they often have little or no control. In determining how best to frame the work to recognise the complexity of their situations and do justice to their perspectives, it has been necessary to draw on the thinking of a number of critical theorists to construct a framework that acknowledges the intellectual and political implications of a boarding school education as well as the personal, subjective impact it has on identity and belonging.

**Critical theory, justice and the ‘politics of difference’**

Key informants in this study were First Australian alumni, or the family/community members of young people who attended or are currently attending predominantly non-Indigenous boarding schools. As ‘Indigenous scholars’ in their schools, most were in a small minority. A threshold issue is therefore the extent to which they should have been treated as a distinct constituent group, or whether it was reasonable for schools to expect them to ‘slot in’ and allow school culture to speak for them as it supposedly does for other students. In understanding the implications of what participants describe, a critical awareness of the complex and manifold ways that injustice can occur within schools is important.
Indigenous scholarship programs are premised on the expectation that education is powerful in creating a just and equitable society, but what this means in real terms is complicated. Contemporary global priorities in education have profoundly changed the way we think about and consider justice claims (Keddie 2012, Rizvi & Lingard 2010). Iris Marion Young in her *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990) argues that in a heterogeneous society, justice requires explicit recognition of difference. Distributive justice, such as the provision of education scholarships to socially and economically disadvantaged young people, is undermined where difference is overlooked in favour of a civic public ‘which transcends particularities of interest and affiliation to seek a common good’ (p97). Young argues that the denial of difference contributes to the oppression of social groups: claims to impartiality feed cultural imperialism by allowing the ‘particular experience and perspective of privileged groups to parade as universal’ (p10). She acknowledges that cultural reactions are usually unconscious, ‘often exhibited by liberal-minded people who intend to treat everyone with equal respect’ (p11). She concludes:

‘A conception of justice that fails to notice and seek institutional remedy for those cultural sources of oppression … is inadequate. … Recognition of group difference also requires a principle of political decision making that encourages autonomous organization of groups within a public. This entails establishing procedures for ensuring that each group’s voice is heard in the public, through institutions of group representation’ (pp11-12).

Her argument speaks powerfully to the experience of First Australian students and their families as they engage with high-performing boarding schools.

**Indigenist and Critical Race Theories: recognising structures of power**

The work of Indigenist and Critical Race theorists have been crucial both in shaping methodology in such a way that First Australian voices come to the fore (Delgarno 1989, 1990) and in understanding the subjective personal, and objective political, ramifications of narratives participants have shared through the research process.
Writing in the Canadian context, Marie Battiste (2013), explores the reasons that Aboriginal children perform less well in education than other Canadian children. In her analysis, the impact of racism and the colonial legacy, with its assumptions about the value of knowledge and its assimilatory norms, are writ large. She observes:

‘Whiteness and privilege are less evident to those who swim in the sea of whiteness and dominance. Confronting racism, then, is confronting racial superiority and its legacy, not only in history but also in contemporary experience’ (p125).

Similarly, in her landmark article ‘Just What is Critical Race Theory and What is it Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?’, Ladson-Billings explains:

‘CRT begins with the notion that racism is “normal, not aberrant, in American society” (…) and because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture… racism is a permanent fixture of American life. Thus, the strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations’(p12).

As a non Indigenous researcher, the work of these theorists is important at two levels: in the first instance, they unmask continuing colonial asymmetries of power and the normalcy of racism in Australian society. In the second they reaffirm my commitment to ensuring that First Australian people are at the centre of the research environment and that their voices predominate. The centrality of personal experience in challenging assumptions of colour-blindness and schools’ assertions of race neutrality are integral to understanding the outcomes of First Australian students at school, and also their post school choices and trajectories (Parker 2015).

These theories also help to define the perimeters of my own position. While past experience and present involvement allows me a certain privileged, ‘insider’ status within the Independent school sector, this theoretical lens functions as a constant reminder that my standpoint as a non Indigenous researcher means that my comprehension of issues raised by participants, particularly in relation to race, indigeneity and the colonial legacy, will only ever be partial (Bishop 2005, Tuhiwai-Smith 2012). This is consistent with the work of Ladson-Billings (2000) who outlined how CRT, within
a multi-disciplinary context, can be seen as both theory and method in the sense that it not only guides how one views the research context but also how the theory shaped the research process (Parker 2015).

In the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), I understand that my primary responsibility is to ‘get the story right, and tell the story well’ (p226). Events in recent Australian public life ranging from the booing of Indigenous football players when they step beyond accepted stereotypes, to the treatment of Indigenous young people in juvenile detention, where they are scandalously overrepresented, suggest that applying a critical race lens to the experiences of Indigenous students at school is both appropriate and timely.

Social Class

Indigenous scholarship programs have great potential to act as the key plank in a ‘class conversion strategy’ for First Australian students (Meshulam 2014) and this has implications for them at many levels. Further to the discussion in Chapter 2 of the differentiated schools market in Australia, and the structural inequities described in Chapter 1 which work to relegate Indigenous students within the education hierarchy, class is as important as race at a subjective, personal level.

In her landmark study of class inequalities in America, Lareau (2011) found that Americans are much more comfortable recognising the power of individual initiative than recognising the power of social class (p7). Nonetheless, she found that class-based logics of child rearing had a direct impact on how children performed at school. In particular, she found that middle-class approach to child-rearing meshes seamlessly with the practices and values of society’s dominant institutions (p63). The benefits that therefore accrue to middle-class children can be significant, but Lareau found that they ‘are often invisible to them and to others’. She concludes:

‘In popular language, middle class children can be said to have been “born on third base but believe they hit a triple”’ (p13).

In this, her finding is consistent with bell hooks (sic)(1994) who claims that ‘nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational
settings’ (p177). Hooks writes that as a young black woman accepting a scholarship to Stanford University, she went ‘thinking that class was mainly about materiality’. She quickly came to understand that class ‘was more than a question of money, that it shaped values, attitudes, social relations, and the biases that informed the way knowledge would be given and received’ (p178).

Just as many schools claim to be ‘colourblind’ in spite of the Eurocentric norms that inform their pedagogy and practice, the ramifications of class inequality are also invisible to the naked eye. The outworking of this is evidenced in the assumption that because boarding school is a melting pot of young people from different social backgrounds, they will benefit equally from what prestigious schools have to offer (AIEF 2015, p20). By contrast, Stahl (2012) argues that for white working-class boys in London, ‘attending school is entering an entirely different ‘social space’ dominated by middle-class values’ (p40). For them, ‘the rejection of schooling is a (gendered and classed) performance’ and that ‘for the most part their ‘resistance’ is a process of excluding themselves from what they were already excluded from’ (p41).

The narratives informing this study provide insight into how the confluence of class, race, gender and indigeneity worked to shape outcomes at school and further downstream for participants.

**Bourdieu: reconciling the inner self and the outer world**

The confluence of indigeneity, race, class and gender, amongst other factors, is important to the extent that participants describe these factors as shaping their attitudes to school, their engagement and academic attainment, as well as relationships at home and life choices in their post-school years. For this reason, it is necessary to adopt a framework that allows for the reconciliation of objective (physical or metaphysical) environments, with subjective, internalised understandings of self. How an individual sees him or herself is, after all, fundamental to how he or she interacts with the outside world. In this the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his attempt to account for what he saw as an ‘ontological complicity’ between objective structures and internalised structures (Grenfell 2008, p44) is particularly apposite.
In order to capture the complexity and significance of the experience of living at ‘the cultural interface’ (Nakata 2007), Bourdieu developed a series of conceptual tools that work to mediate the subjective and objective, and yet avoid dualisms embedded in subjectivist and objectivist modes of thinking. As Michael Grenfell (2008) explains:

‘[Bourdieu’s] studies focus on the changing structures and institutions of this world (as external objective readings) all while analysing the nature and extent of individuals’ participation in it (an internal subjective reading). These two distinct social logics are inter-penetrating and mutually generating… Bourdieu’s intent is to construct a model of the social space, which accounts for a set of practices found there’ (pp 214-217).

The Bourdieuan tools of habitus, capital and field are simultaneously cultural, relational and contextual (Stahl 2012). They are equally concerned with structure and agency, and with the tension between the two. They are therefore useful both as a theoretical orientation and as a way of working with data so that difficult-to-detect asymmetries of power become more readily discernible.

- **Habitus**

Bourdieu (1990) developed his notion of *habitus* as a way of accounting for actions that cannot be rationally explained, but emanate from the deep internal ‘self’. Instead of conceptualising the individual as an ‘active subject confronting society as if that society were an object constituted externally’ (p190), Bourdieu described the habitus as the inner self which has absorbed aspects of the external world in such a way that ‘they structure the individual’s perception of that world as well as their action in that world’ (Bourdieu 1988, p81).

He describes habitus as a set of dispositions that have been internalised and ‘become durably incorporated in the body’ so that they become ‘permanent’. The term ‘constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history, and that it belongs to genetic mode of thought’ (Bourdieu 1993, p86). It is in habitus that nature and nurture coalesce: while a body exists in a social world, the social world also exists in the body (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2004). Reay points out that one of the crucial features of habitus is that it is embodied, not composed only in mental attitudes and perceptions, although it encompasses those as well;
‘Bourdieu writes that habitus is expressed through durable ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking (...). Peoples’ relationships to dominant culture are conveyed in a range of activities, including eating, speaking and gesturing (...). So the habitus of the social is inscribed in the body of the biological individual’ (Reay 2004, pp432-433).

Bourdieu argues that school is a ‘central generative space for habitus, where the student is directly and indirectly imparted with patterns of thinking and being’ (Stahl 2015, p23). This has particular implications for students studying in institutions imbued with cultural norms that are fundamentally at odds with those of their community of origin.

Where world views collide in cross-cultural school settings, young people are at risk of being collateral damage. They are left to bear the weight of what Reay (2002) describes as the ‘contradiction and tension between the social order and psychological processes rather that the ‘homology, redundancy and reinforcement between the two systems’ that Bourdieu (1999, p512) asserts is normative’ (Reay 2002, p223). Rather than growing continually in understanding of the world and their legitimate place in it, for these young people, exposure to dissonant worlds leaves them increasingly confused and uncertain of who they are and where they fit in. The theoretical tool of habitus provides a useful mechanism in describing this phenomenon.

Implicit in Bourdieu’s work are questions of whether school is a democratising agent, and what the implications of education are at an individual level (Grenfell 2008). Whereas rhetoric around Indigenous boarding programs suggests that by attending high-performing mainstream school, students are empowered to ‘walk in two worlds’, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus enables us to problematise that assertion. Using the notion of habitus in conjunction with allied concepts of capital and fields we can interrogate the

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8 In Stahl’s study, he found that for working-class students, education was ‘fraught with potential risks and embarrassments’ and most came to feel powerless and educationally worthless (p22). For those young people, embracing personal educational ‘success’ grounded in individualistic and aspirational norms, meant relinquishing the communitarian mindset of their home communities.

9 Reay describes the particular anguish of a young man doomed by his school experience to a ‘habitus divided against itself’, to a ‘duplication, a double perception of self’. He is therefore left ‘positioned in an untenable space on the boundaries of two irreconcilable ways of being’ (p223).
assumption that aspiration and personal advancement are unequivocally desirable objectives (Friedman 2016).

- Capital

The concept of capital derives from economics, where it refers to anything that is reducible to monetary value. Bourdieu takes the notion further, recognising four main types of capital which have currency beyond the purely fiscal. These include economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, all of which are relational and do not operate independently of each other (Stahl 2012). For Bourdieu, capital consists of resources an individual can ‘inherit and draw on as they confront various institutional arrangements (fields) in the social world’ (Lareau 2011, p361). For the purposes of this study, cultural and social capital have particular significance.

- Cultural Capital

Cultural capital refers to the cultural resources an individual can draw on to their social advantage. The education system institutionalises cultural capital in the form of knowledge and skills that are valued and that in the longer term will translate into higher paid employment (Crossley 2005). Using Bourdieu’s theoretical tools, MacLeod (2009) argues that:

> ‘schools serve as the trading post where socially valued cultural capital is parlayed into superior academic performance. Academic performance is then turned back into economic capital by the acquisition of superior jobs. Schools reproduce social inequality, but by dealing in the currency of academic credentials, the education system legitimates the entire process’ (p25).

Lareau & Weininger (2008) argue that the differential and differentiated cultural capital students bring with them to school either facilitates or impedes their ability to conform to institutional expectations. Where schools fail to recognise the significant bank of cultural capital those young people may have brought from home, this presumably has implications for their engagement and self-concept.

- Social Capital

Like other critical theorists, Bourdieu is always attuned to power and to patterns of domination (Lareau, 2011, p361). His theorisation of social capital recognises the power
embedded in social networks. He recognises that elite schools play an important role in the transmission of privilege precisely because of their power to generate social capital in the form of networks of ‘well connected’ people (Bourdieu 1984).

First Australian students come to boarding school with their own web of social networks. Often built around family, community and kinship, these networks very often have little or no overlap with the networks operating within the wider school world. This thesis will test the proposition that establishing networks within the dominant society is one of the benefits for First Australian students studying in prestigious schools.

Although the ‘old school tie’ network is one manifestation of social capital, other theorists have developed this concept further. Beyond Bourdieu’s interest in social networks, a great deal has been written about the formation of social capital and how the term should be understood in the field of education. Drawing on the work of Robert Putnam, the OECD defines social capital as:

‘Networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups’ (OECD 2008, Putnam 1995, Helliwell 2007).

Literature suggests that there is a strong correlation between years of schooling and social capital (Langton 2004, Glaeser 2001, Coleman 1988), and that strong networks and educational achievement are mutually reinforcing, particularly in times of transition (Coleman 1988, Darmody 2012). Where the social worlds of home and school have no points of connection, however, questions arise as to whether forms of social capital, especially bonding capital as described by Coleman (1988), may be threatened by schooling.

- Field

Bourdieu’s description of habitus as socially constituted require a collateral conceptualisation of the social space in which interactions, transactions and events occur (Grenfell 2008, p65). His theorisation of field is pertinent to this study insofar as it recognises that fields transcend the physical to incorporate sites of power. In these less tangible fields, differential endowment with various forms of capital (particularly economic capital and cultural capital) means that power and privilege are also
differentially distributed.

Bourdieu developed the notion of field as a way of recognising the importance of context to explain events or social phenomena. More than physical locality, a ‘field’ according to Bourdieu is an accumulation of capitals: economic; cultural; social and symbolic. The dialectic relationship between the notions of field and habitus is particularly pertinent to this study. As Bourdieu puts it:

‘Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's energy' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p127).

This suggests that despite the tendency for fields to work as structures of social determinism and reproduction, they do not preclude individual agency. This is particularly the case when disparate fields of power require a person to actively choose how they interact in either context.

When the subjective self, the habitus, is in sync with the field of power in which it operates, the two work in tandem. As Bourdieu attests;

‘Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p127).

By contrast, when an individual’s habitus is out of step with the field in which he or she operates, a crisis is precipitated. In this instance, what ensues is

‘A habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities’ (Bourdieu 1999, p511).

One the primary aims of this study is to hear from young people how they have managed to accomplish the difficult task of maintaining a sense of self that is consistent as they walk between two worlds; in Cohler (1982) and Schiff’s (2014) psychological frame, how they construct a consistent narrative of self. Boarding schools are by definition highly structured, highly regulated, highly functional and high stakes institutions that are in
every way culturally removed from the home lives that participants in this study describe. High-expectation boarding schools may play a role in educating First Australian young people, but the contrast between two social fields that are in many ways binary opposites presents them with formidable challenges along the way.

Bourdieu suggests that such a conflict requires individuals to actively assess habits and assumptions that would normally operate at a sub-conscious level; as these are brought to consciousness they are also questioned and replaced with a more deliberate and critical mode of relating to the social world (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, Crossley 2005, p50). This in turn generates change and necessitates the evolution of habitus. *Habitus, capital* and *field* are useful analytical tools because they are rooted in the assumption that individuals have agency within social contexts. McLeod (2005) argues that:

> ‘Bourdieu’s concepts offer a way of understanding how the social is insinuated in the subjective, not in random idiosyncratic ways, but in ways that are socially structured, and carry a history with them. Power can be understood as ‘capillary’, to use Foucault’s metaphor, but for Bourdieu the capillaries follow a pattern that can be apprehended and reflect ‘objective relations’, even if at some distance and in attenuated ways’ (p26).

One of the chief aims of this study is to identify and understand those patterns of power, and empowerment, as they are experienced by and later manifest in the lives of young people who have attended boarding schools. People are more than passive recipients of social structures; they have the power to develop what Stahl (2015) describes as a ‘counter-habitus’. This allows actors to associate or disassociate at will from dominant discourse within a given social field.

**Bourdieu: race, class, caste and understanding colonial logics**

There is not room in this thesis to explore in depth the biographical genesis of Bourdieu’s schema, except insofar as to acknowledge that his concepts of habitus, capital and field can be traced at least in part to his earliest sociological work in Algeria. His observation of the Algerian people’s spatial and temporal displacement by French colonists prompted the formation of his ideas about location, habitus, and symbolic violence (Whiting 2013, p53). Bourdieu readily acknowledged the importance of the colonial paradigm to his theory of practice, reflecting:
‘Many of the problems that I have been led to address …and the very concepts I had to develop to resolve them sprang from my effort to understand men and women who found themselves thrown into an alien economic cosmos imported by colonization, with mental schemes and dispositions, especially economic ones, acquired in a precapitalist universe’ (Bourdieu 2002, p5).

It was in this context that Bourdieu turned to the concept of ‘caste’. This enabled him to highlight the social construction of racialisation and power inequality in the French colonial world (Go 2013). Bourdieu observed that caste (by which he meant ‘race’ supported by political privilege (Wallace 2016, p4)) was entrenched in colonial Algeria not through legislation but through ‘a strict social script that determines domination and often necessitates political struggle’ (p3).

Bourdieu identified the deep interconnection between the colonial order, structural racism and class inequality (Wallace 2016). In describing the linkages between racism and colonialism, Bourdieu wrote:

‘It would indeed be useless to hope to abolish racism without destroying the colonial system of which it is the product; it would be the height of pharisaism to condemn the racism and the racism spawned by the colonial system without condemning the colonial system itself’ (1962, p50).

His words have resonance in contemporary Australia, where apparently entrenched and ubiquitous racism is being increasingly named in the public domain (Grant 2016) and where constitutional recognition for our First Peoples is yet to be enshrined (Dodson 2016). How these issues manifest, and how these theoretical concepts might be applied to better understand the lived experience of First Australian students in mainstream boarding schools has not been examined in academic literature.

Schools as instruments of social reproduction

As described in Chapter Two, the practice of sending First Australian students to high performing schools is in part an attempt to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and enable a new social order to develop through education. Where Apple (2013) asks if education can change society, the expectation that it will do exactly that underpins Indigenous boarding programs. Pearson (2011a) identifies the potential for
high-performing schools to disrupt unhelpful social norms and instill in young people a vision for their lives that presupposes that they have a voice and effective agency over their own future. At the same time, high-performing boarding schools are steeped in dominant cultural norms that shape the spoken and unspoken expectations students are required to conform to, even if they are at odds with the organising precepts of home communities.

To the extent that Pearson obliquely references the power of schools to ‘get inside a student’s head’ his view is consistent with Bourdieu’s thesis that:

‘Among all the solutions put forward throughout history to the problem of transmission of power and privileges, there surely does not exist one that is better adapted to societies which tend to refuse the most patent forms of the hereditary transmission of power and privileges, than that solution which the educational system provides by contributing to the reproduction of the structure of class relations and by concealing, by an apparently neutral attitude, the fact that it fills this function’ (Bourdieu 1973, p258).

Giroux (2001) explains the theory of social reproduction by claiming that ‘schooling represents a major social site for the construction of subjectivities and dispositions, a place where students from different social classes learn the necessary skills to occupy their class-specific locations in the occupational division of labor’ (p78). Schools are able to reproduce power relations subtly via the production and distribution of a dominant culture that tacitly confirms what it means to be educated. The implications of this for First Australian young people living and studying in dominant cultural settings are not straightforward.

The repercussions of how class and race-based power and privilege intersect with the identity of First Australian students and their families is a constant focus of this study. High-performing boarding schools are effective vehicles not only for the transmission of skills, but also for structures of privilege. In elite schools, the social advantages that one generation enjoys are most fully realised when they are secured for the next. Personal skills, tastes and dispositions supposedly couple with membership of exclusive alumni networks to enable lives of opportunity and choice. Bourdieu argues that there is a
constitutive and reflexive relationship between objective structures and subjective sensibilities:

‘Social structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked, and the correspondence between them provides one of the most solid props of social domination’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p14).

Inevitable complexities arise when social structures and cognitive structures are fundamentally at odds. Despite this, in discussing models of policy development in Aboriginal education, Beresford & Gray (2012) argue that ‘elitist’ policy approaches ‘do not necessarily carry the same negative connotations’ as they do for the broader community ‘because of the presence of extreme disadvantage among the former’ (p143). Consistent with Pearson’s argument, the authors conclude that disproportionately rewarding some Aboriginal students ‘may be necessary so that the Aboriginal community can begin to enjoy the same opportunities as the broader community’ (p143). By contrast, writing in the same year, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that the elite status Indigenous students attain through attending high-end schools comes about ‘through the alignment of their cultural and economic interests with those of the colonizing group rather than with those of their own society’ (p68). According to this frame, ‘social reproduction’ that seeks to invest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with the skills and dispositions necessary for education ‘success’ may easily translate as an assimilatory ideal that diminishes or discredits the human and social capital these young people bring with them from home.

Resistance

One criticism of the theory of reproduction is that it is overly determinist: ‘trapped in a reductive logic that appears at odds with the aim or even the possibility of developing a radical theory of education’ (Giroux 2001, p77). By contrast, the notion of resistance provides a framework for examining schools as social sites (p107) where subordinated young people have power and agency to confront and dispel stereotypes that attach to them in dominant cultural institutions. The concept of resistance redefines the meaning and cause of oppositional behaviour by arguing that:
‘It has little to do with the logic of deviance, individual pathology, learned helplessness (and of course, genetic explanations), and a great deal to do, though not exhaustively, with the logic of moral and political indignation’ (Giroux 2001, p107).

In his study of Black male college achievers and resistant responses to racist stereotypes at predominantly White colleges and universities in the United States, Harper (2015) found that the literature on students’ experience tends to focus on the challenges associated with stereotypes rather than on how students responded to and resisted racial stereotypes. Beyond efforts to ‘prove them wrong’, little else about how Black students respond to the threat of racist stereotypes had been documented. Harper found that unlike previous research that associated ‘success’ with ‘acting white’ (Ogbu 2003, Beresford & Gray 2012), participants in his study resisted stereotypes by assuming leadership positions and through active engagement, particularly in predominantly Black student organisations. Black male achievers gained a level of race consciousness and confidence in their communication abilities that enabled them to respond productively to stereotypes. Whereas negative performance outcomes are generally associated with racial stereotypes and racial essentialism (Paradies 2007, 2008, Fforde et al. 2013, Bamblett 2015, Sarra 2011), Harper found that positive outcomes can be produced for those who gain the confidence and competencies to boldly confront stereotypes.

Conclusion

This chapter has outline the theoretical framework that is used in this thesis. Theory has made visible recurring patterns that emerged after almost a year of working through and reworking through the more than 1300 pages of transcribed interview data collected for this study. Critical theory provides a vocabulary to describe patterns of power as described by young people and their families. Bourdieu’s theoretical tools of habitus, capital and field, and his characterisation of schools as instruments of social reproduction, are effective in honouring the truth, universally recognised by participants, that subjectivities are as powerful in enabling or constraining education ‘success’ as any externally mediated supports or interventions. These concepts make it apparent that particular outcomes are brought about not solely by dint of a student’s disposition, nor
entirely because of a school’s approach, but through the dialectical and ever-evolving interaction between the two.

Boarding schools are complex social constructs which, depending on a person’s political and social positioning, come with their own inherent biases. If one of the roles of the critical scholar is to ‘restore to people the meaning of their actions’, then an essential task in this study is to make visible the unspoken and unseen assumptions, the ‘common sense’, that variously constrained or enabled education success for participants. The theoretical toolkit presented here makes that possible. It allows us to see with new eyes and begin to glimpse how the capillaries of power flow between schools, First Australian students, families and communities in seemingly- but never quite- random patterns.

Chapter 4 will outline the fieldwork design of this study.
Chapter 4

Research Methods and Fieldwork Design

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of young First Australian adults who have attended such boarding schools. It is centred on the belief that in order to understand how mainstream boarding schools work to shape futures for First Australian students we must engage directly with key stakeholders: young people, their parents, key community members. These objectives recommend a qualitative research design able to uncover a range of factors that work to mediate the education experiences of a heterogeneous group of research participants.

Indigenous research methodologies are essential here (Craven 2016, Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Indigenous Australian research methods often emphasise yarning (storytelling) because in this way people are afforded the opportunity to make sense of the events of their own lives (Geia, Hayes & Usher 2013). Notwithstanding their lived experience, the voices of young people are typically silenced in the debate around the place of boarding schools on the spectrum of educational opportunity available to First Australian youth. The young people with whom I have been involved have never been invited to give an ‘exit interview’ to schools, and Indigenous programs in those institutions have typically evolved in a fairly ad hoc way that may or may not meet the needs of participants in them.

For these reasons, I committed to a research approach that ensures that ‘ordinary people’ are regarded as ‘authoritative sources of knowledge’ in such a way that their experiences and concerns are brought to the forefront. By foregrounding voices that are often silenced or marginalised, I am hoping that this research project becomes a site where we are able to ‘listen and participate with those traditionally “othered” as constructors of meanings of their own experiences and agents of knowledge’ (Bishop 2005, p123).
In presenting findings, I have chosen to let participants ‘tell it in their own words’ as much as possible. Whereas schools construct one narrative around their Indigenous programs, the insider perspective is often quite different. Their standpoint reveals concerns, priorities, objectives, expectations and assumptions that they describe as fundamental to their school engagement and attainment. Their narratives do not tell the whole story, or the only story, but for the purposes of this study they tell the most important story.

This chapter begins by setting out the methodological rationale for this study, then goes on to detail the research design. The following chapter disaggregates data to help substantiate quasi-quantitative terms used in the presentation of research findings.

Qualitative Research: benefits

‘Qualitative research is an important tool for indigenous communities because it is the tool that seems the most able to wage the battle of representation... to weave and unravel competing storylines... to situation, place, and contextualise; to create spaces for decolonizing... to provide frameworks for hearing silence and listening to the voices of the silenced... to create spaces for dialogue across the difference; to analyse and make sense of complex and shifting experiences, identities, and realities; and to understand little and big changes that affect our lives’ (Tuhiwai-Smith 2008, p136 as quoted in Liamputtong 2010, p12).

Bryman (2012) cautions that social research is inherently ‘messy’ (p15), and that is certainly true of this study. This research project engages with diverse social and cultural contexts. It reports on a wide range of outcomes that participants describe as flowing from their time in mainstream boarding schools. It sits within a political and media landscape that preferences an uncomplicated narrative of ‘success’, but fails to engage with the ‘dense realities’ of people’s lived experience. Taken together, these factors recommend a qualitative research design that focuses directly on the particular experiences of participants.

In seeking to understand complex social settings such as those at the centre of this investigation, it is appropriate to employ a qualitative research methodology that is both
inductive and naturalistic (Liamputtong 2010, Bishop 2008, Denzin & Lincoln 2008, Bryman 2008). This study moves between a broad sociological interpretivist mode and a multiple case study method, where cases are explicated using narrative analysis. This allows for sometimes contradictory narratives to be explored, while still working towards concrete findings that will contribute to the development of systems and approaches adapted to better serve the target population (Stake 2006).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p19) argue that when undertaking research, a researcher is ‘guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood or studied’. These are the researcher’s ontological, epistemological, methodological, axiological, and rhetorical assumptions (Creswell 2007).

Ontologically, my approach assumes that reality is subjective and therefore multiple, as experienced by different people or groups of people. Understanding how young people and their parents perceive the impact of school experience on post school life requires that they have the opportunity to recount their own particularistic version of events. Like much narrative inquiry research, this study therefore revolves ‘around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them’ (Chase 2011, p421).

Epistemological issues concern the question of what is or should be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a particular discipline (Bryman 2012, p27). Bishop suggests an epistemological approach to Indigenous research that is ‘characterised by the absence of a need to be in control, by a desire to be connected to a moral community where a primary goal is the compassionate understanding of another’s moral position’ (Bishop 1998, p203, Denzin et al. 2008, p11). I began Chapter One by positioning myself as a non Indigenous researcher; an outsider status that necessitates a research methodology that foregrounds Indigenous voices. As such, I have found myself:

‘repositioned in such a way as to no longer need to seek to give voice to others, to empower others, to emancipate others, to refer to others as subjugated voices, but rather to listen and participate… in a process that facilitates the development in people of a sense of themselves as agentic and of having an authoritative voice...’ (Bishop 1998, as quoted by Denzin et al. 2008, p14).
In her work on qualitative research in cross-cultural settings, Liamputtong (2010) explains how using a narrative inquiry approach allows for the research participants (the narrators) to use the researcher as an interlocutor to bring their situations to the attention of target audiences (p171). The 2003 study on the experiences of Maori students in secondary school classrooms conducted by Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richards is a good example of this: the researchers in that study invited students to tell stories about the factors that would limit and/or improve their outcomes at school. By collecting testimonies from students, participants were given the opportunity to share stories and present their experiences so that ‘teachers who otherwise might not have had access to the narratives could reflect upon them in terms of their own experiences and understanding’ (Bishop 2008, p155). Students in that study talked of ‘the impacts and consequences of their living in a marginalised space. That is, they explained how they were perceived in pathological terms by their teachers and how this perception … had negative effects on their lives’ (p155). As teachers reflected on and absorbed the messages contained in students’ narratives, they were enabled to review their attitudes and adapt their classroom practice in such ways that self-determination of Maori students became paramount in classroom relationships. In turn, this learning led to the development of a professional development program for teachers (Bishop 2008, Liamputtong 2010, pp171-172).

The objectives of my study align closely with the work of Bishop and his colleagues. By foregrounding the voice of First Australian young people who have lived in boarding schools, and the voices of their families or key community members, schools and policy makers may better understand the particular needs and perspectives of these populations.

**Ensuring reliability**

A central concern of qualitative research is how to ensure reliability and trustworthiness of the both the data collection process and findings drawn from processed materials. This has implications for research design and implementation. Interviewing involves a ‘reciprocal construction’ (Yates 2013) where reliability and trustworthiness require a critical awareness of the researcher’s own position (O’Toole & Beckett 2013). Equally, an understanding of the socio-linguistic conventions of communication in different
cultural settings is essential: this includes the use of body language, personal space, non-verbal prompts, meanings attributed to silences or long pauses in the conversation, eye contact and tone of voice (Kearins 2000, Vicary et al. 2006, Bessarab & Ng’andu 2010). Beyond specifically cultural mores, O’Toole & Beckett cite Clandinin & Connelly as identifying a three-dimensional enquiry space that looks:

‘*inward into internal conditions-* feelings hopes, moral dispositions, etc.; *outward to the existential conditions,* paying attention to the wider environment and social context; *backward and forward to acknowledge the temporality of experience,* the historical conditions and the intentions of the researcher and the researched’ (p73).

A degree of interpretation is necessary in conducting interviews, particularly where participants’ first language is not English, as well as in transcribing and analysing data. This makes the process of member checking at each stage particularly important (Chilisa 2012, p166). Integrity requires that participants approve both the substance of interviews and the conclusions drawn from them.

This study seeks to shine some light on the long-term impact of boarding school experience on First Australian students. To some extent, but only to some extent, it is a retrospective exercise, looking back on key moments alumni now identify as seminal in their adolescent years (Chase 2005, 2011). How the past has worked to shape participants’ present reality is difficult to elucidate in any meaningful way. Reconstituting the past is an inexact science, and O’Toole and Beckett draw attention to the inter-twining of changing ontological perspectives and evolving epistemologies (pp37-45).

A criticism that is levelled against qualitative research is that the primary sources on which it is based are often anecdotal and give the reader little sense of the prevalence of issues that stories raise (Bryman 2012). Bryman (p624) makes the point that ‘a particularly striking statement by someone … may have more significance attached to it than might be warranted in terms of its frequency.’ He suggests that qualitative researchers who engage in ‘quasi-quantification’ through the use of terms such as ‘many’, ‘frequently’, ‘rarely’, ‘often’ and ‘some’, should bolster claims of frequency by engaging in a limited amount of quantification where appropriate (p624). As a way of mitigating this limitation, Appendices F and G provide disaggregated data that go some way to
justifying the way that anecdotal evidence is used in this study. The real significance of this research, however, lies not in the numbers but in the rich descriptions participants give of factors that constrained or enabled them during or after their time at school.

**Narrative Method**

Constructing narratives and the act of storytelling may serve a variety of different purposes for different people in different contexts. In her 2008 text, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Reissman argues that narratives are ‘strategic, functional, and purposeful’ and that ‘storytelling is selected over non-narrative forms of communication to accomplish certain ends’ (p8). In writing for the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Analysis* (2011), Chase defines ‘narrative’ as a distinct form of discourse, which makes meaning:

> ‘through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one's own or others’ actions, of organising events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time’ (p421).

In eliciting meaningful narratives, contemporary studies reveal the importance of ‘small stories’ that emerge from and organise social interaction. It is perhaps in these almost incidental moments that unspoken values and attitudes are most evident (Chase 2011). This is true of any research that engages with narrative environments that are ‘multiple and layered’ (p430). ‘Narrative’ in this study has therefore been taken to include both the ‘grand narrative’ that emerged from long stories that had a beginning, middle and end, but also the more fragmented anecdotes that emerged incidentally in conversation or in interviews.

Adopting a narrative approach to this research potentially benefits research participants. Bertram J. Cohler’s (1982) seminal chapter *Personal Narrative and Life Course* explores the role of storytelling for establishing selfhood and identity. Cohler argues that an individual’s ability to reflect on their lived experience, and from it construct a coherent narrative, is essential to their identity and personal wellbeing. He observes that ‘lives seem to be characterized by often abrupt transformations’ brought about by both ‘expected and eruptive life events’ and by ‘intrinsic, but not necessarily continuous,
developmental factors’ (p227). Making sense of external events and intrinsic developmental factors within the wider frame of their life, history and social context allows individuals to make sense of themselves and the world ‘in the midst of a changing personal situation and a changing world’ (Schiff 2014, p6). Brian Schiff explores the place Cohler’s work in the field of developmental psychology and concludes:

‘Cohler’s great insight… is that storytelling is our way of wrestling with the dilemmas and distractions that define human existence. Persons make sense of life – of the life that they have, of the life that is given to them. We need to. The challenges are unrelenting, from birth until death. And, the solutions that we arrive at have consequences for our sense of being whole, vital, and progressing towards worthy goals. We advance, or we don’t, on the basis of our capacity to create adaptive narratives that make sense to ourselves and others’ (p3).

A number of the alumni participants in this study volunteered that the process of looking back and recounting the story of their school years within the context of their larger life story was cathartic. It helped them to differentiate the structural from the subjective.

Working with narratives: ensuring integrity in processing data

This study does not seek to establish positivist, externally verifiable ‘truths’, but rather to gain understanding into participants’ lived experience from their own point of view. Reissman (2002) reflects that ‘narratives are interpretive and in turn require interpretation: They do not “speak for themselves” or “provide direct access to other times, places or cultures” (p236). The act of interpretation is inherently political, and herein lies a danger. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) provides a salient reminder that as a Western researcher I inevitably risk falling back on culturally situated assumptions that reflect and are embedded in public and privately mediated asymmetries of power. She writes:

‘Research in itself is a powerful intervention, even if it is carried out at a distance … When undertaking research, either across cultures or within a minority culture, it is critical that researchers recognise the power dynamic that is embedded in the relationship with their subjects. Researchers are in receipt of privileged information. They may interpret it within an overt theoretical framework, but also in terms of a covert ideological framework. They have the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright
...misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance’ (p178).

Her words highlight the reliance I have as a researcher on participants and their willingness to revisit interview data post hoc, as well as on the wider Indigenous community for on-going guidance and interpretive advice. My insider/outsider status in this research project creates tensions, but also affords opportunities to the extent that my ‘functional autonomy’ (Merton 1972) as a researcher remains uncompromised. Although I am associated with the Independent school sector, I am not in paid employment. Where data turn up inconvenient truths about schools and systems, finding effective and uncompromising ways to communicate those truths is essential to the integrity of this research project.

- Establishing findings: locating the meta-narrative

Narrative interpretation in this study is not only to furnish ‘thick descriptions’ of individual experiences (Geertz 1973), but also to describe common features of these experiences. In this, my first-hand experience of, and ongoing work in, the boarding school sector inevitably influences my reading and reporting of participant narratives.

In medicine a CT (computerised tomography) scanner creates a three-dimensional (3D) image of the inside of the human body by generating a series of two-dimensional (2D) x-ray images taken around a single axis of rotation and merging them to form a single 3D image. Similarly, in this study, individuals’ stories provide slices of insight which, when layered with others, give perspective, clarity and reliability to the picture that emerges about how attending boarding schools works to shape the future for Indigenous young people. In words commonly attributed to Aristotle, ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’ By layering individual narratives, a meta-narrative emerges from the data that reveals patterns of experience. These in turn inform research findings.

Interview data has been analysed using a narrative method to identify emergent themes and particular concerns of research participants. In order to capture the breadth and depth of the experiences they describe, findings chapters move between a broad sociological lens and focused, in-depth case studies. The direct quotations included in the following
chapters have been carefully selected as representative of the meta-narrative identified through the data analysis phase of this project. At all times my primary concern as a researcher has been to remain true to the complex and at times contradictory accounts participants give of their lived experience of boarding school.

Case Study Research

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe a case study as a ‘phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context’ (p25). Although single cases are the subject of much qualitative research, the authors argue that multiple case studies offer the researcher ‘an even deeper understanding of processes and outcomes of cases, the chance to test (not just develop) hypotheses, and a good picture of locally grounded causality’ (p25).

Stake (2006) characterises multiple case-study as a ‘special effort to examine something having lots of cases, parts, or members’ (p vi). Although individual cases may be intrinsically interesting, he argues that research interest is focused on the collective of cases and how phenomenon are exhibited across the whole. Stake labels this ‘the quintain’ and he claims:

‘The quintain is something that we want to understand more thoroughly, and we choose to study it through cases, by means of multicase study’ (p vi).

Following Stake, the ‘quintain’ in the current study is the collective of predominantly non-Indigenous boarding schools that have designated places reserved for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as part of an ‘Indigenous Program’. The cases reported in subsequent chapters have been chosen from the larger body of interview data because they make visible issues of material importance described by participants. Yin (2009) argues that case studies are useful when a “how” or “why” question is being asked about a contemporary set of events. This is in keeping with the objectives of the current research project.

The current study is concerned to understand the lived experience of First Australian students in mainstream, some would say ‘Whitestream’ (Grande 2009), boarding schools. By problematising the notion of ‘success’, the taken-for-granted assumption that
high-performing, high-expectation schools produce excellent results for First Australian students, is also called into question. Adopting a multiple case study methodology allows for a close examination of the way boarding school impacted a particular group of young people. The new knowledge that the case studies reported here generate is therefore useful to education practitioners, parents and policy makers alike.

- Generalisability and case study research

One concern with case study methodology is the lack of generalisability of findings. Freebody (2003) cautions against placing too much emphasis on a particular local site or narrative, where the case is taken to represent a larger whole (p99). Flyvbjerg (2006) responds to the concern about generalisability by claiming:

‘formal generalization is only one of many ways by which people gain and accumulate knowledge. That knowledge cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in a society’ (p10).

He argues that the in-depth description and examination of a single case may be central to the development of new knowledge that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions. Other commentators argue that relatability is more important than generalisability in case study research (Bassey 1999). Bassey’s priority is the usefulness of education research to teachers, and as such, he argues that the study of a single case is profitable insofar as it encourages practitioners to reflect on their own practice, and whether the observations and findings emerging from case study research have any resonance in their own setting. A like concern has driven this research project. As a former teacher, and in the work that I continue to conduct with schools in the independent school sector, my primary objective is always to provoke discussion, reflection and understanding of what constitutes best practice in schools. That the cases presented here also have implications for government policy, philanthropic investment and parental education choices, speaks to the power of personal narratives. While findings in this research project may not be generalisable, they are nonetheless relatable.
Fieldwork Design

This thesis explores the lived experience of Indigenous students in boarding schools across Australia. The multiple case study methodology enables a range of interests to be represented, and facilitates a dual focus on the broad sociological phenomenon as well as more in-depth analysis of particular experiences as described by participants.

Boarding schools around the nation cater for First Australian young people from a wide range of backgrounds. Some have histories of providing boarding places for First Australian students reaching back several decades. Despite this, existing literature tends to focus on the transition of these students to boarding school, rather than their in-school or post-school experiences. Similarly, more research attention has been paid to the experience of students coming from remote communities, than to how young people from urban or regional homes fare in, or after, boarding school (Beneveniste 2014, 2015, 2015a, Mander 2015a, Stewart 2015b). Although common sense suggests that students from remote communities might face challenges that their urban counterparts do not, this has not been tested in the literature. A range of potential implications flow from this, for students, schools and for policy makers. This research project contributes to building a knowledge base to assist all parties in making informed decisions around the role boarding schools play for students from diverse geographic, language and cultural backgrounds.

Ethical Considerations

An ‘Application for Approval of a Project Involving Human Participants’ was submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne and approved on 21 May 2014 (Application number 1442048.1). A slight variation to the scope of the application was approved on 24 June, 2014 (Application number 1442048.2) to enable staff at schools to be interviewed subject to principal approval. A copy of the application is attached as Appendix A.

This study was conducted pursuant to all relevant research protocols currently in place at the University of Melbourne. As much of the work focused on engagement with First Australian populations, it was conducted in accordance with the highest possible
standards as outlined by the University; The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) statement ‘Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research’; and ‘Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies 2012’ produced by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

While they are particularly pertinent to health research, the NHMRC guidelines provide a level of detail that is instructive to any researcher engaging with First Australian communities. They prioritise a commitment to on-going consultation with communities built around six key values: spirit and integrity; reciprocity; respect; equality; survival and protection; and responsibility (NHMRC 2003, p8).

The AIATSIS Guidelines are underpinned by key principles that should inform all research undertaken with Indigenous people: negotiation; consultation; agreement and mutual understanding; participation, collaboration and partnership; benefits, outcomes and giving back; managing research: use, storage and access; reporting and compliance. The guidelines state that:

‘It is essential that Indigenous people are full participants in the research projects that concern them, share an understanding of the aims and methods of the research, and share the results of this work. At every stage, research about Indigenous peoples must be founded on a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and Indigenous people’ (AIATSIS 2012, p1)

A number of writers highlight the difficulties of defining the boundaries of ethics in social research and advocate instead for commitment to an ‘ethical attitude’ (Chase 2011, p426, Bryman 2012, p584). A sensitivity to issues that raise potential ethical conflict has been essential to research integrity in design, implementation, analysis and the reporting of findings.

Because participants in this study were all adults, ethical issues were somewhat simplified, but asking people to recount critical incidents from their school days carried an inherent ethical risk. Bryman characterises this risk as including four possible ethical
problems. These include potential harm to participants; lack of informed consent; an invasion of privacy; or deception (p135).

- Managing potential harm to participants

In terms of potential harm to participants, the re-telling of traumatic experiences is an area fraught with difficulty (Chase 2011, p428). For students who did not graduate from school or who did not make effective post-school transitions, issues of shame could potentially have arisen (Harkins 1990). For young people who were in Year 12 at the time of being interviewed I was constantly aware that speaking about current issues may have run the risk of bringing the surface things that were easier to suppress at that time. While it was important to hear difficult stories, it was of paramount importance that they should be volunteered and not coerced. For young people who had experienced traumatic life events in their home communities or for whom there was no family or community precedent of educational engagement, the markers of ‘success’ were in some cases not the same as for other students. The importance of framing questions in such a way that no ‘ideal’ was implied was an on-going concern.

Participants all freely gave consent to be involved in this study and were informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended uses of the research, what their participation entailed and what risks, if any, were involved (Bryman 2012, p146). Each was expressly informed, orally and in writing, that they were free to withdraw consent at any stage in the research process. Informed consent documentation is attached as Appendices B, C and D.

Participants have a right to understand how their stories have been interpreted and used. Consent was therefore sought at each stage of the data collection and analysis process (Chase 2011, p424). Because the exact use to which data might be put may not be known in advance, Chase suggests that narrative researchers should return to narrators before each republication of work (p424). Several papers have already been presented from this research (AARE Conferences, Freemantle 2015, Melbourne 2016, Trinity College Tertiary Transitions Conference November 2016), and where possible participants were
given the opportunity to read and approve papers before they were delivered. All longer case studies included in this study have been approved by participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity have been strictly ensured. Data, as well as participant names, addresses and correspondence, are being stored in a secure location. Identifier codes are stored in a separate location to lists of participants.

Managing contingencies and research with vulnerable populations

As described in the literature review, there are a number of intersecting factors that create challenges for First Australian young people as they navigate the education system in general and the boarding school sector in particular. These include factors such as geographic, cultural and emotional separation from family; the inter-generational impact of past policies of forced separation; disadvantages associated with low socio-economic and socio-educational background; family breakdown; challenges presented by transition into and out of highly regulated, high stakes school environments. In a number of instances, I was made aware that an interviewee was suffering the ongoing effects of trauma that predated their boarding school experience.

While in an ideal world young people might ‘orbit between two worlds and enjoy the best of both’ (Pearson 2011a, p46), in reality, moving from one world to another may create real trauma for young people and raise questions as to where they belong and what contribution they may make to society. All of these things contribute to a young person’s self-concept as learners, as family and community members and as alumni. These questions inform their perspectives on whether or not they have achieved ‘success’.

Most interviewees in the alumni group were young people at a vulnerable time in their lives; for many of them career paths were not yet established, and their sense of belonging was clearly still in a state of flux. Of more than thirty-five alumni with whom I spoke on or off the record10, a significant proportion confided that they had experienced serious

10 On a number of occasions, conversations continued after the formal, recorded interview had concluded and important observations or comments were not ‘caught’ on the record.
mental health issues either during their school years, or after they left. These have included depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and attempted suicide. This raised the issue of how, as a responsible adult and potentially as the person who has reawakened difficult memories, I could best ensure the on-going safety and support of these young people. In every such case I have maintained on-going contact with interviewees, and where necessary have alerted key members of their community to the potential that they might need a degree of extra support as they reflected on difficult moments in their lives.

**Sampling**

When setting up the research, the aim was to gather a range of data consistent with the heterogeneous backgrounds of First Australian students currently resident in Independent boarding schools, and the different education outcomes they achieve. Consistent with the suggestion of Bryman (2012), and to bolster the clarity and reliability of research findings, Appendix G provides details of all participants, including their geographic and linguistic background and their education outcomes.

Because many Indigenous scholarship programs have only been established in the last ten to fifteen years, I had assumed that I would only target young people, preferably in the 18-30 year old bracket, and/or their parents. Beyond the practical, I was anxious not to conflate issues surrounding the boarding experience with the consequences of government policies of forced separation from family that continued into the 1970s. As data collection phase progressed, however, a number of older people requested that they be interviewed, and I felt impelled to hear their stories. Similarly, a number of parents or grandparents interviewed reflected on their own experience of being stolen from families and sent away to boarding institutions and compared this with the experiences of their children or grandchildren. This broadened the sample group beyond what I had anticipated, and has been useful in exposing how boarding schools have or have not developed in their understanding of First Australian students’ needs. While this is not a longitudinal study, there is an element of retrospectivity provided by the research sample.

These were noted in field notes, and where appropriate these are referenced in findings chapters.
Because this project is inherently inductive in nature, I did not begin with a fixed idea of the number of people who would be interviewed, but continued to recruit participants until I found that saturation had been reached. This is the point at which no new themes emerge in the data or when the same ideas keep recurring in interviews (Miles 1994). This is consistent with literature described above around ensuring robust research findings (Adler 2012).

Participants include First Australian alumni of a variety of boarding schools from around Australia, who achieved a variety of outcomes. Some attended schools where the whole or a significant portion of the student population was Aboriginal or Islander. Although these participants do not fall within the key target population, their testimonies provide a useful foil to the narratives of participants who attended predominantly non-Indigenous schools. Participants include those who completed Year 12 and those who pulled out prior to completion. While Year 12 graduates who had effectively transitioned to employment, further education or training were a relatively accessible population; those who did not complete school, or who completed school but did not make smooth transitions in post-school life were generally harder to reach. Participants range in age and include alumni who attended boarding school during the 1960’s to current Year 12 students. Consistent with the ethics approval detailed below, all participants were over the age of 18 years at the time of being interviewed. Appendix G provides disaggregated data on alumni participants for cross-referencing in subsequent chapters.

The second participant group was made up of parents or key leaders of communities from which students have been selected to attend boarding schools. This group provided rich insights into the objectives and observed outcomes of a boarding school education for their young people.

The third (and smaller) group of participants were teachers or school leaders. These included three principals of schools with large or exclusively Indigenous populations; members of school governing councils; the director of an Indigenous residential facility where boarders attend a variety of local schools; directors of school Indigenous programs, teachers and/or boarding house staff in predominantly non-Indigenous schools. These participants are described collectively as education participants. They were invited to
reflect on their understanding of why First Australian students were at their schools in the first place, and on the outcomes being sought for them. Those education participants working in predominantly non Indigenous boarding schools provide an important contextual backdrop to the accounts of key alumni participants.

The sample populations for this study was purposively selected to reflect the diversity in the Indigenous student population attending boarding schools. The characteristics taken into account included:

- Gender;
- School completion/non-completion;
- Differences in post-school transitions;
- Geographic area (urban/ regional/remote/very remote communities);
- School sector (Catholic/Independent);
- Proportion of Indigenous students within school population

Participants included thirty-five alumni of boarding schools and twenty-seven parents/grandparents; one focus group discussion with five parents and key community leaders; twelve interviews with school leaders and staff of boarding schools including several interviews with employees of predominantly Indigenous schools. Of alumni participants twenty-one were male, fourteen were female. Amongst the parents, sixteen were female and eleven male (see Appendices F and G).

By providing variety in the participant group this study has produced rich data reflecting a number of different perspectives on what factors alumni of boarding schools identify as significant in constraining or enabling their school experience and their post-school outcomes. This may generate further research in a number of areas as specified in subsequent chapters.

**Understanding the school context**

First Australian students attend a wide range of boarding schools across Australia, but as explained in Chapter 2, key participants in this study attended high performing, highly
academic boarding schools in capital or regional cities around Australia. In each case the school has an above average ISCEA value as reported on the *MySchool* website. The decision to focus on the experiences of young people in these schools reflects my own professional background, as well as government policy prioritising boarding over community based education alternatives (Wilson 2014). Significant financial investment is made both by government (Commonwealth of Australia 2017) and by the philanthropic sector (see for example AIEF 2016, Yalari 2016) to create opportunity for First Australian students through the agency of schools such as those represented here. The cost of attending these institutions is high; many charge annual tuition and boarding fees in excess of $50,000 (Exfin 2017). Every dollar that is spent supporting a First Australian student in a high performing boarding school could be spent in any number of other educational initiatives, and particularly on community-based programs. Despite this, no independent evaluation has been made of Indigenous boarding programs. This study contributes to filling this gap in the literature.

Whereas there is a perception that high performing schools necessarily beget positive outcomes for First Australian students (AIEF 2017), my concern has been to understand the complex realities that confront young people living and studying in culturally foreign settings. Findings have implications for educators, for policy makers, for parents and communities, who seek to make informed education choices for their young people.

**Participant recruitment**

- **Snowball sampling**

Because some of these populations were difficult to reach (Noy 2008, Bryman 2012) and because the research process was essentially iterative in nature, in the first instance a snowball sampling technique was used. Bryman describes this as a technique in which:

> ‘the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research’ (p424).

In order to establish a meaningful sense of a participant’s experience of school and post-school life and their connectedness to networks, it was in some cases necessary to interview other people within the student’s life sphere or within educational institutions.
Noy observes that this is an advantage of using snowball sampling: he argues that because it is a technique that relies on the ‘dynamics of natural and organic social networks’ (p329), the sampling methodology itself:

‘ties the sampling procedure to other aspects and phases of the research. That is, when viewed holistically, different research facets amount to a gestalt where each facet contributes synergistically to the overall research design, which, in turn, can potentially generate an organic and ‘thick’ type of knowledge’ (p332).

Noy makes the point that data accessing and data collecting processes are ‘mutually dependent’ in that;

‘the quality of the referring process is naturally related to the quality of the interaction: if the informant leaves the interview meeting feeling discontented, or if the researcher did not win the informant’s trust and sympathy, the chances the latter will supply the former referrals decrease (and vice versa)’ (p335).

Beyond this practical outcome, Noy argues that because snowball sampling relies on the existence of social networks, it also constitutes a tangible measure of a person’s social capital. He adopts Bourdieu’s notion of social capital stemming from ‘membership of a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit’ (Bourdieu 1986, pp248-249). He claims that;

‘Informants who possess social capital and are willing to share it—or to perform and embody—with the researcher are those informants who are members in social networks, who have more friends and acquaintances than others (they maintain both tight and loose relationships), and are therefore located centrally. In snowball stemma these informants are depicted as inhabiting network junctions, where their ‘network capital’ (…) assumes a visual manifestation’ (Noy 2008, p335).

As gaining insight into participants’ bank of social capital is directly relevant to research findings in this study, snowball sampling was doubly appropriate: by using this method, ‘knowledge [was] at the same time both researched and produced… and [was] of a dynamic nature’ (p340).
Limitations of snowball sampling

The risk with using a snowball sampling method is that people refer others whose cultural background, school experience or education outcomes are similar to their own. Over time this became an issue in this research project. In particular, many of the early participants had not transitioned from school to higher education and were finding it difficult to adjust to post-school life. While their testimonies are central to this thesis, their stories did not represent the full spectrum of experience of First Australian students attending boarding schools. For that reason, in early 2015 I approached the director of an Indigenous program at a tertiary residential facility and through that person purposively recruited a number of participants who had attended boarding schools and subsequently transitioned to university.

Data Collection and Analysis

Over the space of approximately 20 months I conducted semi-structured interviews, loosely constructed around existing literature, with participants from every state and territory in Australia with the exception of Tasmania.

Fieldwork required travelling to remote and very remote places, where I typically stayed for several days at a time. The timeline of interviews is reproduced as Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interviews- participant code</th>
<th>Participant state of origin</th>
<th>Interview recorded in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May '14</td>
<td>1x Alumni 2x Parents/community leader (only 1 transcribed)</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June '14</td>
<td>2x Alumni 1x Parent</td>
<td>Vic/NSW/NT</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June '14</td>
<td>1x Parent 2x School Principals</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Regional NT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June '14</td>
<td>6x Alumni 4x parents 3x school leaders/teachers (Several other interviews recorded, not transcribed)</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Very Remote NT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July '14</td>
<td>1x alumni 1x teacher</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July '14</td>
<td>1x alumni 3x parents</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Very Remote NT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 Timeline of Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August '14</td>
<td>2x alumni (inc 1 follow-up) 2x teachers</td>
<td>Vic/NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August '14</td>
<td>1x alumni 2x parents</td>
<td>NT/NSW/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August '14</td>
<td>3x alumni 2x parents 1x school leader</td>
<td>Qld</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct/Nov '14</td>
<td>3x alumni 1x teacher</td>
<td>WA/Tas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb '15</td>
<td>7x alumni 3x parents</td>
<td>WA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb '15</td>
<td>2x alumni</td>
<td>WA/Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April/March '15</td>
<td>2x alumni (follow up) 1x parent</td>
<td>Vic/NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June '15</td>
<td>2x alumni 1x Parent</td>
<td>Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>1x program director</td>
<td>WA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept '15</td>
<td>2x alumni (follow up) 2x parent 1x teacher</td>
<td>Regional Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept '15</td>
<td>1x parent</td>
<td>NT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept '15</td>
<td>1x alumni and parent (follow up)</td>
<td>WA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov '15</td>
<td>1x alumni 1x teacher</td>
<td>WA/NSW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By conducting interviews in a yarning style (Bessarab 2010, Craven 2016), participants were able to direct the conversation. The stories they naturally chose to recount were revealing of their concerns and priorities and became an important factor in analysing data. Through this process, the relationship between interviewee and interviewer was one of narrator and listener, where my primary role as researcher was to invite specific stories and seek to understand the meanings people attached to those events (Polkinghorne 2007; Chase 2011). In order to provide evidence of how these interviews proceeded, the full, de-identified transcript of one interview is included as Appendix H.

While initial interviews typically lasted for one hour, I was able to record follow-up interviews with a number of participants. Several interviewees travelled to Melbourne with the express purpose of being interviewed for this study. They stayed with my family, and again this provided ample opportunity for clarification and further exploration of ideas raised in the initial interview. I am deeply indebted to these young people, not only
for their time, and trusting me with their stories, but also for the range of gifts that they brought with them: artworks they had made, and on one memorable occasion a polystyrene box of live mud crabs transported by Qantas on the mistaken assumption that they were frozen.

Interviews were conducted in a wide range of settings including very remote homeland or outstation communities; larger remote and regional centres; schools; my own and other people’s private homes; university residential colleges; cafes or other public places. Each interview was digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. The study yielded more than 1300 pages of transcript data with 1.5-line spacing. A sample transcript appears as Appendix H.

In addition to interview data, extensive field notes were taken. These recorded detailed observations about the setting of the interview; reflections on the demeanour or attitude of research participants; notes making links to other interviews or avenues for further investigation. Many conversations occurred that were not recorded, but yielded interesting insights or perspectives. These were also recorded in the field notes and help to inform the interpretation of interview data.

Each transcript was systematically de-identified and printed out. Stake (2006) recommends that to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation a number of different strategies should be used. These include working and reworking through data, including re-listening to interviews and re-reading transcriptions (p35). Accordingly, I worked through each interview manually in the first instance, seeking to understand the interviewee’s perspective; why he or she might have recounted particular events, what the construction of narratives revealed about his or her primary concerns, and what larger themes emerged. Wherever possible, my interpretation of individualistic accounts, together with the larger narrative that emerged through the analytic process was checked and rechecked with research participants. Research findings have been reported back to participants wherever possible. Invariably they have been curious to know whether others’ experience of boarding school was anything like their own; for some participants knowing that they were not alone in their experiences mitigated an enduring feeling of inadequacy or failure. Where it has been impracticable to report back directly to
participants, I have benefitted greatly from the insight and advice of my supervisor Professor Marcia Langton. I have also turned to First Australian friends, colleagues or acquaintances to better understand the implications of participant’s comments and experiences. I am grateful to the many members of the Koorie community, and to young people studying in Melbourne who are not formal participants, but who have been generous in providing feedback during the analysis and writing-up phases of this project.

In addition to working by myself, over the course of 2015 I spent a day a week working alongside a colleague whose research interests broadly align with my own. Together we worked through our respective interview data, discussing in detail issues, constructions and priorities. Having an ‘outsider’ review transcripts was particularly useful in challenging my interpretation of critical episodes, and our collaborative efforts yielded many rich insights. Transcripts were annotated, a process that Harper (2012, citing Moustakas 1994) refers to as ‘bracketing’. At the end of each session I created a summary including the profile of the research participant and a brief synopsis of the interview. A sample appears as Appendix I. In some cases, these summaries formed the basis of detailed case studies which appear in this thesis. Where our discussions raised issues that needed clarification or elaboration, this led to follow-up interviews being recorded, or member checks being conducted. On a number of occasions, I sought the advice of professionals to better understand the implications of participants’ narratives. An example of this is a morning spent working through transcripts with an expert in trauma informed education.

Through this multi-tiered process of working with interview transcripts, a series of recurring topics, trends and patterns emerged, which I reduced to simple code words. I uploaded data to qualitative data analysis software program NVivo, and entered manually identified codes as ‘nodes’ for line-by-line coding. I applied these nodes to words, sentences and whole passages of text in each transcript. Later I used the word search function in NVivo to identify references that had not been picked up in either coding process. By combining the manual analysis, and NVivo coding and search functions, I identified a series of factors that participants recurrently identified as significant in constraining or enabling their engagement and academic attainment at boarding school,
or as having implications for post-school life choices. From this process the findings presented in subsequent chapters emerged.

**Limitations of research methodology**

In making the methodological choices articulated here, a number of other worthy research designs have been rejected. Alternative methodological approaches include:

- Quantitative analysis;
- Evaluation of a particular boarding school scholarship or program;
- Interviews with non Indigenous boarders as a comparison;
- Interviews with First Australian students who did not attend boarding school to provide a counterfactual.

Given that there is almost no contemporary, independently evaluated, base line or longitudinal data tracking the performance of First Australian students in boarding schools, any or all of these alternatives would have produced valuable data. In particular, the lack of any quantitative analysis may be seen as a weakness in this study.

By contrast, by maintaining a purely qualitative focus, this work unapologetically foregrounds the voices, and focuses on the lived experience of alumni and their families and communities. Having interviewed people across Australia, and having amassed and scrutinised a large and diverse dataset, a pattern of experience emerged that has implications for families, communities, schools and policy makers throughout the nation. What the chosen research methodology lacks in quantitative analysis, or as an assessment of the relative value of different education options, it makes up for in the insights it delivers in relation to the boarding school sector.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach and fieldwork design for this research project. It has looked at the particular issues that have arisen for me as a non Indigenous researcher working with First Australian participants. It has justified research methodology and described methods including the data collection and analysis process, and cultural safeguards built into the design to ensure integrity and accountability at every stage of the research process. It has discussed issues of trustworthiness that arise in
qualitative research and explained the process of arriving at research findings. These will be presented and discussed in the chapters contained in Parts 2, 3, 4, and 5 following.
Part 2

Reading from the same page?
Identifying the aims and expectations of
Indigenous boarding programs
Chapter 5

Introduction

To understand what factors and influences research participants felt were important in shaping their engagement and attainment at school, and how these worked to shape their post-school lives, it is necessary to understand what drove their choice of boarding school in the first place. Whereas the discourse surrounding Indigenous boarding programs tends toward homogeneity, this work is committed to building a nuanced understanding of the backgrounds, motivations and aspirations of a participant group marked by its heterogeneity. To identify the diverse outcomes that alumni participants, their families and communities sought through a boarding school education, is to reframe the notion of ‘success’, currently defined by reference to school completion and post-school transitions.

Although the majority of participants in this study were alumni of boarding schools or their parents/community members, twelve interviews were also conducted with school principals or teachers (described collectively as education participants). Each was experienced in working with First Australian students in a boarding setting. To the extent that this small sample of educators were able to articulate their own perceptions of why students were in the school, their testimonies provide an institutional context to the accounts of participants who describe their lived experiences at school. Education participants were invited to reflect on their understanding of why students were at their schools, on the outcomes being sought for them, and the expectations they, as professionals, had of students and their families.

Although educators make up the smallest group of participants in this study, the chapter begins with their voices. Their narratives shed light on the social field of the boarding schools they represent. Against this backdrop, the voices of alumni, parents and community members illuminate shared perspectives or dissonant viewpoints.
Purpose and presumed benefits of Indigenous programs: education participants

Having an ‘organising narrative’ is fundamental to any large organisation, and schools are no exception. This is made up of the publically articulated values and objectives that inform policy and practice within the institution and shape its distinctive culture (Geertz 1973, Williams 1958). For schools, these values also inform pedagogy and curriculum choices. Many schools within the independent sector have strong and ongoing church affiliations, and their guiding principles reflect those roots. More broadly, a commitment to academic excellence and educating the ‘whole person’ so that young people are equipped to take their place as leaders in the modern world, is a common refrain in advertising materials. The descriptions schools publish on the government’s My School website are testament to this trend (ACARA 2016).

As a subset of schools’ wider education aims, Indigenous programs in mainstream schools are also typically supported by an organising narrative, especially where they are partially or completely funded by the wider school community. The AIEF’s *Compendium* identifies two alternate models that schools might adopt in starting an Indigenous scholarship program:

- ‘A model that positions the school’s efforts in a narrative that identifies a group of students facing significant challenges, and dedicates itself to helping them overcome those challenges.
- A model that positions the school’s effort in a narrative that identifies the potential for excellence in a group of students, and dedicates itself to providing an opportunity for them to realise that potential’ (p27).

AIEF encourages partner schools to identify the model that ‘aligns best to their motivations for starting a program’. While the *Compendium* cautions that the narrative underlying a school’s Indigenous program ‘can flow over into the student community and therefore influence how Indigenous students see themselves… and how other students see them’ (p27), there is no acknowledgement of the consequences to young people of a program rooted in deficit thinking.
Having shared objectives and clear aims are fundamental to any school program. They ensure consistency in delivery, and the coherence of pedagogy and philosophy. By contrast, participants in this research reflected that in their experience the *ad hoc* growth of their school’s Indigenous program meant it was not supported by an effective organising narrative. A number of teachers who had worked in high performing schools where Indigenous programs had been operating for some years, reflected on the lack of any clear or shared objectives that informed their work. When asked about the aims of the program he had run, one respondent replied:

At that stage it was just to get kids in. So there was no academic aim, there was nothing... there had been no formulation of ideas about how or why or any of that sort of stuff... how we do it or why we do it, or the essence of it or anything, we just knew it was socially the responsible thing to do. [T7]

Other participants recounted similar stories; of programs beginning with a general social justice focus and evolving over time in response to the needs of individual students.

Teacher participants from a variety of schools reported that while school management developed a public narrative to support the Indigenous program, for those working with students at grassroots level, it had little relevance. They reported having received no preparation or professional development before beginning to work with the First Australian young people in their charge. This meant that issues known to impact the learning outcomes of First Australian students (De Bortoli 2010) went unanticipated.

Several commented also on the lack of Indigenous content in their pre-service training at university. As one participant put it, her qualification for teaching a number of Aboriginal students came down to her being ‘generally left wing and aware of Australia’s history’ [T2]. These interviewees reflected on the genuine ethic of care that they and other staff sought to enact for minority First Australian students in large establishment boarding schools, but also on the fact that apart from being supported by particular staff appointed to run ‘the Indigenous program’, students ‘were very much expected to get on with it’ [T1] even if they had no idea what that might mean. This was borne out by the reflection of an alumni participant from a very remote community, with a language background
other than English. His experience, seen through a Bourdieuan lens, illustrates how damaging it can be when staff do not have a clear understanding of the students they are working with.

This young man [A1, very remote] had commenced school at the beginning of the final school term ‘because that was when the athletic season started’, and he ‘wanted to impress them ... that I did good in school’. He was dismayed that although he was ‘running fast’ he had to ‘still do an exam on what I learned in term 4’. He explained, ‘it was frustrating ... because ... I didn’t feel I needed to do it... or I didn’t want to do it, but I had to do it’. His comments indicate an inherent contradiction between his habitus, built as it was on his confidence as a talented Indigenous athlete, and the habitus of the school, which emphasised and valued academic achievement above all else. His sporting prowess had acted as the lens through which he had initially (mis)read the social field of the school and his place in it. On the running track, he had found what Fitzpatrick (2013) describes as a ‘welcoming, affirming and meaningful space’ (p151); a place where he could simultaneously align his habitus not only with the institutional habitus of the school but also with the collective habitus of his home community where his athleticism was recognised. In her New Zealand based study of health and Physical Education as sites of learning, Fitzpatrick argues that the sporting field is a space where Maori and Pasifika youth can gain educational capital and creates potential for transformation. Her research affirms Bourdieu’s (2005) thesis that ‘the very contradictions and struggles within a field can, potentially, generate change’ (p152). For the young man here, the opposite is true; the discrepant expectations that he had of the school, and that staff had for him, limited his confidence and his desire to invest in the education opportunities on offer.

A number of education participants reflected that publicity surrounding the school’s program took the place of a well-articulated organising narrative, and this too had implications for students. They described an expectation that young people would be ‘grateful’ [T6] for the opportunities afforded them and respond accordingly. One former boarding house master reflected that students were consistently expected to avail themselves of every opportunity the school offered. He claimed that this burden of expectation was ‘problematic’.
My boss would have liked them all to participate ... taking advantage of every opportunity, get around and shaking everyone’s hand ... these sorts of things were all good things in that all the boys were learning in that environment, but there was too much pressure ... I remember having a meeting with [student] and one of the tutors from his house and his mentor one night ... about leadership ... because my boss was ... pushing this ... he was just ‘I don’t want to do it’, and he sat in this meeting shaking, crying ...

Where fundraising to support programs was undertaken, a number of participants suggested that this added to the complexity of a young person’s school experience, and often continued for many years after they had left. Teachers commented on the effort that was directed at creating perceptions of success so as to encourage philanthropic generosity, even in circumstances where this might not have been in the best interests of the student. Notwithstanding any moral complexities, from a fundraising perspective this approach seems to work: one participant recounted that at his school $600,000 was raised to support the institution’s Indigenous program in a single night.

Whether the tactic works as well for the young people who are held up as ‘success stories’ is less certain. A number of participants (both education and alumni) reflected on how students were used to feed the school or scholarship provider’s PR machine, with seemingly little regard for the young person’s own wellbeing. One recounted how at a dinner attended by 500-600 people, a young man who had witnessed his father’s suicide was asked to speak:

He was asked by my boss to tell that story and he cried as part of that speech, and then everyone was saying to him afterwards, you’re amazing, you’re just amazing ... and it was pretty amazing, but is this really good therapy for you? Is that something we should be enabling you to do? ... I don’t know, there’s so many questions, but ... you know all these blue blood kind of people there.

This incident had made a deep impression on the participant and caused him to question the extent to which the underlying objectives of Indigenous education programs can become lost in the hype associated with building public support. He reflected that while students might initially enjoy ‘feeling special’ when they are singled out for media and other PR attention, over time they become more cynical. When I asked whether students were aware of these issues he responded:
I reckon from Year 10 they would start to have an idea [that they are being used for PR purposes]. Before that? No. Before that they would see it as exciting, as being hand-picked to do something special. Wow! I’m on the front page of *The Australian*. … Wow, I got to ask the Prime Minister the first question on *Q&A*. Sitting up here with my uniform on, surrounded by four or five, half a dozen… of my other compatriots… but once they hit Year 10 … If I now engaged with [student] about that, he would absolutely have a view about that, no question… he would say yeah, ‘absolutely’ …. The blackest kids were often the ones who were on show … he’d probably say … ‘for sure’ if I asked him the question. It would be patently obvious to him that that’s what was happening.

His claims were ratified by interviews with alumni participants, a number of whom reflected that they were never invited to give the school honest feedback on their time at school, but were often called on to make presentations. Edward Said’s (1978) seminal work on the theory of representation and his positioning of the oriental ‘other’ as a ‘passive object to be governed’ is apposite here. It is picked up by Hage (2012) who argues:

‘The way the voice of the ‘ethnic other’ is made passive not only by those who want to eradicate it, but also by those who are happy to welcome it under some conditions they feel entitled to set… ‘ethnics’ are welcomed… [but] ultimately the debates work to silence them and construct them into passive objects to be governed by those who have given themselves the national governmental right to ‘worry’ about the nation’ (p17).

For young people described here, it is clear that their scholarship position came with the ancillary expectation that they would help to create an institutional narrative of success. When asked to explain why it existed or what the school’s Indigenous program was seeking to achieve beyond Year 12 completion, many teacher participants found it hard to move beyond broad generalities about social justice. The lack of a strong and stable organising narrative informing professional practice seemed to leave individual students vulnerable; obliged to create favourable impressions and responsible to ensure financial viability of programs going forward by sharing their life stories, however painful they might be.
Implications of a strong organising narrative

By contrast, one education participant recounted how she worked hand-in-hand with school management, Aboriginal families and local elders to establish what later became one of the leading Indigenous programs in the Australian Independent school sector. At the time of being interviewed she had handed over the reins of that program and moved into the tertiary sector. There she sought to offer university students the same level of care and support that had assisted in their secondary academic success. Her approach was founded on, and guided by, a clear set of organising principles. Indeed, the narrative that informed the program also worked to inform Indigenous students’ self-concept, and their individual education trajectories: it endowed young people with ‘a greater sense of who they were and where they’re going, and a sense of strength in their spirit that enabled them to get through secondary schooling and then go on post school to become the people that they dreamed of becoming at school’ [T5].

In this case, the participant had begun by actively researching how to support Indigenous students in Australian schools. She had ‘come across Chris Sarra’s [Stronger Smarter] model of identity, belonging, and vision of identity strengthening’ that she concluded was ‘really spot on’. Consistent with Battiste’s work (2013), this participant identified ‘cultural strengthening’ and ‘assimilation’ as binary alternatives at work within school Indigenous programs. She argued that these have far-reaching ramifications for young people:

… you either practice assimilation or you practice cultural strengthening. There’s nothing in between. And if schools say that they are not assimilationist but they do nothing to make students stronger culturally while they’re away from their home and community and country, they’re just cheating everyone, and that line in the sand for me is really clear.

[T5]

The schools featured above all had a clear commitment to social justice through education. The education participants interviewed testified to a genuine ethic of care, but they also reflected on how limited schools’ understanding of, or capacity to, accommodate cultural difference was. By contrast, this [T5’s] participant’s narrative
indicates that where school leaders have sufficient volition, real change can occur. Her message to schools is powerful, and the efficacy of the approach she implemented in both secondary and tertiary settings justifies her being quoted at length:

I don’t think people really want to say ‘I’m an assimilationist’, but if they really understand what that means... it’s hidden in words like integration. It’s hidden in words like – we don’t like to identify when it’s different. It’s hidden in words like ... oh we’ll leave all the kinship and culture to their communities. What I would say to all schools and to boarding houses is that schools were the last bastions of cultural destruction and they were places which students were not allowed to practice their dances and their language and their identity. They were really shut down and not given permission to be proud of their aboriginality. And so if they were the sites of deconstruction of culture, then they have to become the sites of reconstruction of culture, and because of the Stolen Generations, kids between the ages of thirteen and 24 are having an identity crisis in Australia... Aboriginal kids are having an identity crisis, and school can actually help serve Australia’s future by enabling them while they’re at school to reconstruct who they are in a really positive way, and I think what you will find is that those kids then don’t end up in the prisons and end up in the gangs and end up dead because they leave with a sense of – it is really, really cool to be black, it is really cool to be an Aboriginal person in Australia. I have a lot of opportunity and have a vision of what I want to do. And if schools don’t take that up, then you just repeat the cycle of deconstructing who they are, and I think that’s really challenging... as hard as that question is, I think schools have to take responsibility back to say I’m going to make you a stronger black person than you were.

Whereas other participants talked in terms of organic growth, learning through trial and error, a post hoc set of organising principles, this teacher spoke of programs developed, initially in a secondary boarding context then later in a tertiary residential facility, with a clear vision, and a commitment to education success so that Indigenous young people are empowered to ‘become the people they dreamed of becoming’ [T5].
Before moving on, it is interesting to reflect on what alumni participants felt had motivated their schools to establish Indigenous scholarship programs. For most, feelings were mixed: on the one hand, they expressed gratitude for the education they received, but on the other, many were cynical about the real impact their presence had within the wider school community. One young woman was unequivocal:

<table>
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<th>A21, urban</th>
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<tr>
<td>I think it’s about money and status ... I got asked a lot to do things on Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC Week, and it was almost like it was making [boarding school] look like they were really a diverse college that were really accepting of all cultures, but at the same time, they weren’t actually doing anything to support me being there ... they would be happy to pull me out when they wanted photos of the new Indigenous student at their school, or they wanted me to come and speak at Reconciliation Week or things like that ... of course I appreciate getting the scholarship, but those scholarships are in place because of equity, not because they’re giving me a free ride ... It’s actually because how our society is structured ... the opportunities we should be getting and can’t because of our lower socioeconomic status, and that’s because of the history of this country. So at the time I was ... dealing with everything and sort of being like okay, I don’t feel great about this, I feel like I’m not being treated well, but at the same time, I just have to let it go because if it wasn’t for this institution I wouldn’t be here, I don’t have the money for this .... I felt I didn’t have the right to be there, and so I just kept sort of letting people treat me badly or ask me to do things that I wasn’t comfortable doing because I felt obliged to do it.</td>
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The political undertones in her interview speak to an imbalance of power, and a persistent sense that schools’ claims of inclusivity and cultural respect are at best skin deep. This sentiment was echoed by many of the tertiary educated participants. When asked what he would like to say back to his school, one young man did not hesitate:
Don’t … do it for statistics. Do it for the people. Like sometimes I feel it’s … it looks good, but really it’s pretty crazy what’s going on inside the kid’s head. It’s hard for them too – you can’t really dig it out… you will never know…

[A1, very remote]

One of the often-cited benefits of Indigenous programs in predominantly non Indigenous schools is the impact that they have on the wider school community. Data indicate that if First Australian students are identified as such, but are in every other way expected to ‘get on with it’ [T1], the burden of educating those around them falls on their young shoulders. Where, by contrast, and consistent with the objectives identified in The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008), Indigenous programs are built through partnerships between schools, students, parents and communities, the Deweyan notion of organic growth becomes possible.

The purpose and presumed benefits of boarding school: families and alumni.

Every one of the parents and community members who contributed to this study made it clear that they cared deeply about access to quality education for their children. They were unanimous in their belief that education is the most effective way to ensure a positive future for young people. For some, boarding school provided a means to that end, for others it presented a complex set of challenges to the continuance of language and cultural traditions. In terms of the objectives of education, some looked to boarding school as a means of ensuring school completion and transition to higher education, but this was only one of a number of broader aims.

Equally, while not all young people reflected positively on their time at boarding school, every alumni saw value in education, and many reflected that they would be inclined for their own children to attend schools away from home if that was the best or the only option. Each added a strong caveat that they would respect the wishes of the child, would never coerce them to leave home, and would ensure that they were adequately supported before, during and after their time out of community:
I reckon it’s just up to him, I wouldn’t force or expect too much of him. I’d just tell him what’s right. And now I can tell all of my kids what’s right or how it’s right down there, and what they should look out for and stuff.

[A1, very remote]

I’d only send them if the school is quite open with … or have a better understanding in our culture … ‘cause obviously with [Boarding School], they had fairly little knowledge of [very remote community] or of Indigenous culture overall.

[A7, very remote]

These comments highlight the need for students to be supported by people who understand, and are able to advocate for them in mainstream systems and institutions. Even with support, several participants were adamant that they would never send their child away to boarding school as the personal cost to young people, communities and culture is too high.

Parents and alumni cited a wide range of reasons for choosing a boarding education. Table 3 (below) shows the distribution of alumni by their reason for attending boarding school. Each of these is expanded by reference to interview data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alumni reasons for attending boarding school n=35</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wanted a challenge or a change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problems in community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of local education alternatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sporting ability</td>
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<td>Leadership attributes</td>
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Table 3  Alumni participants by reason for attending boarding school
Quality/availability of secondary education opportunities in community

Consistent with Mander, Cohen & Pooley (2015), a number of participants from remote and very remote areas reported that boarding school was the only option available for secondary education. In the words of one:

That’s really what it comes down to; we have no choice…. If we want to live where we want to live we’ve got no choice but for our kids to be sent away and [very remote community] is their Dad’s home.

[P2, very remote]

For others, the quality of education available at home was the issue:

My main reason to get out of [remote community] was because the school there was horrible, and yeah... just not many people got through Year 12 there.

[A29, remote].

Boarding schools represented an opportunity because;

In the mainstream schools they have more activities, more things that they could do, you know education and you know things like sports and things that is you know... resources there

[Focus Group, very remote].

This is consistent with Mander et al.’s (2015) study, where the majority of research participants described secondary schools in community as having inadequate school facilities and resources.

For many participants from very remote communities, boarding school had been one of a number of schools and experiences contributing to their education outcomes. Some had stayed only a short time at schools ‘down south’, and several spoke of how the experience had been transformational in that it had jolted them out of complacency- in the words of one young woman it was ‘like an electric shock’ [A6, very remote] and contributed to her developing her own educational objectives.
Change/challenge: Boarding school to broaden horizons and enable two-way learning

For participants from remote and very remote communities, the need to ‘understand how the world works’ outside community was a strong recurring theme. While they often voiced a passionate desire to maintain culture and tradition, parents also wanted their children to understand their place in the wider world:

I wanted them to not only... not follow my pathway, but to ... at least broaden their perspective [to understand that] our land stretches out and there’s a lot more people out there to be talking to about or to meet ... not only know about where they grow up, but know about the world itself, and then that way then they will see a purpose in life and what they have to do.  

[A10, very remote]

Typically parents from remote or very remote communities characterised this as ‘two ways learning’. For them the issue of access to opportunity, life choices and acquiring the tools necessary to ‘walk in two worlds’ through education was a key priority:

We want our kids to have two-way knowledge – learning two way schools... when they grow up they can achieve whatever they want. They have two knowledges, two-way knowledge, and … the two tool-boxes.  

[P13, very remote]

In remote and very remote settings, participants were unanimous that education is a public good. Education builds individual human capital, but the community anticipates benefits also flowing to the collective:

They want to achieve something, and this is not only for the kids, but it’s for the benefit of the community, so we can be proud of. We want to see our students become a doctor; we want to see our students become a pilot, you know or something like that …  

[Focus Group, very remote]
Indeed, the public and private benefits derived from education were described as being mutually constitutive. Education that did not serve that dual purpose was of dubious advantage. The primacy of being strongly grounded in home communities and the cultural values that underpin traditional ways of life was of paramount importance for older people in remote communities. Some were skeptical that an exclusively western education institution could ever deliver this outcome. They worried that Western education is ‘weakening the culture, it’s weakening themselves, it’s weakening everything’ [P14, very remote]. A number insisted that boarding schools could never take the place of a quality, place-based education that enabled young people to remain grounded in place, language and culture and strengthened their identity:

We’ve got a lot of history about the kids going away to boarding school, they’re coming back with problem ... they get assimilated ... sometimes they come back... they dress differently, and the way that non Indigenous behave. They want to be like them, and...people are starting to use the term – people to be ‘normalised’ you know, and what does it really mean? They want us to be normalised? And I think this word is only focusing on [us] – the government want us to be normal people,.... and yet to me, we are living normally.

[P14, very remote]

By contrast,

We want two-ways education you know... bilingual tells us who we are ... It represents who we are, and we should be treated as or recognised as [people group].

[P17, very remote]

While education success and strength in cultural identity were not seen as mutually exclusive or irreconcilable objectives, a number of participants from strong language and cultural backgrounds cautioned on the intergenerational impact on all young people leaving home to attend boarding schools where, in the words of one, ‘their identity changes’ [P14, very remote]. Their concerns mirror Altman’s (2010) observation that when the state seeks to alter kin-based societies in favour of a ‘mainstream’, market-based and individualistic paradigm, this is ‘tantamount to the state actively seeking the
destruction of remote Aboriginal societies whose very existence, sitting at times outside the market, challenges neoliberal principles (p268)’ They are also consistent with Bourdieu’s (1998) argument that the neoliberal project (with education systems fully implicated in its architecture) is just a program for destroying collective structures which may impede pure market logic.

Although they wanted their children to be challenged and extended by going away to school, it was clear that many people in remote and very remote communities had no idea of what life was like for their children in high-performing schools. Nor could they imagine what was required for young people to persevere onto demanding university study. Parents in one focus group discussion debated between themselves how long it is acceptable for a young person to be away from home and culture in pursuit of an education. They concluded that six months to a year should be long enough. When I suggested that that would not be enough time for young people to become doctors or pilots, their unequivocal response was that different models of education must then be supported. They were aware of international models of place-based education and were frustrated that the same opportunities do not exist in Australia:

What we really need is proper education that can be taught, a proper curriculum, you know just like anywhere else in Australia, where kids can learn and develop we want to see development in their education right in the community where our kids can learn the same sort of quality as [other Australian] students …. you know you see Papua New Guineans when they finish their schooling, they return back there you know, and then learn for another six months in the communities.

[P17, very remote]

For many participants from remote communities the priority was developing systems that would enable young people to transition to university through pathway programs. They insisted on their right to access systems that would enable them to attain high levels of western education but at the same time maintain connections with home and culture. They envisaged that for some students this might entail leaving home at some point on their education journey, but this would ideally happen once solid cultural foundations had been laid at home. One parent reflected:
The rhetoric of empowerment sometimes gets used to argue for what really is emerging in white culture with the idea that the kids will like it and seek to get jobs where they can go anywhere in the world. Well the education I’ve had from the community here is that’s not what they aspire to. Yes, they want kids to be able to move around the world, but not to actually leave home, and the most powerful way that community leaders have put that idea to me in the past is the danger of when they go away they grow away.

Consistent with this claim, other parents from remote or very remote places argued that communities should be empowered to provide education on their own terms and on their own country. These people insisted that they have a right to their own understanding of what constitutes a good life:

Something I learned about education, have a better house, good children, good job, kids go to every day school... what’s this all about assimilation? What is it all about making you like a white man? You know, I can be [clan group], die [clan group] and still practising in two worlds, but still [clan group] … Don’t sit up and control the person what they do, but let him explore it himself … what is the destiny for him.

By contrast, some remote leaders saw boarding school education as a way to empower their young ones to protect culture, and encouraged them to stay away at school even when they were yearning to return home. One young woman explained:

So nearly most nights I’d be calling my granddad saying I want to come home, I want to come home, and he’s saying, look – I really need you to be strong ... for me and our family ‘cause I’m relying on you to lead our people, and I want my granddaughter to have a good education. Like have the … have the white knowledge.
His exhortations encouraged this young woman to remain at school, but they were not helpful when she returned home. In this case, the community assumed that because she had finished (an ungraded) Year 12, she was equipped to step into a demanding youth advocacy role back in her community, for which she was given no training and little support. This set her up for failure and made her a target for serious lateral violence from her peers at home. Hers is a good example of the damage that can be wrought when expectations and understandings are dissonant or unrealistic and where education has come at the cost of relationships at home.

- Problems in community and schooling to interrupt patterns of behaviour

Other participants in this study reported that boarding school was perceived to be an effective way to disrupt self-destructive adolescent behaviours and unhelpful community norms. Senior & Chenhall’s (2012) study of the aspirations of a group of young women in a remote community in the Northern Territory examined how their hopes and expectations were influenced by the reality of their everyday lives and the extent to which they were able to exercise agency over their own lives and become agents for change in their communities. It was found that the choices available to participants were constrained by their narrow range of experience and teen pregnancies were common amongst the group. By contrast, the young women who had attended secondary school had been exposed to ‘a wider range of experiences, life choices and potential roles for women’ (p384). These findings were mirrored in the narratives of several participants here. One young woman explained:

So I was living at [very remote community] with my mum and was getting into some mischief... drinking, smoking... staying out late at night, not going to school, and my mum just thought I needed to go away from the community for a little while. So she organised … talks with schools down in [Capital City] because initially [regional boarding schools] were a bit too close to home, a bit too close to everything that was happening, and I needed to get a bit of a shock I think [laugh].

[A6, very remote]
Beyond changing social norms, many interviewees from across all geographic areas described boarding school as a way to reinvigorate young people’s motivation for their schooling:

[Daughter] has always been really high achieving and when she got into Grade 8 she started to go really downhill, so we had to kind of look for something pretty quickly to get her back on track... I believed it was the better thing for her than being up here and getting herself into trouble.

[P7, regional]

The aspiration that boarding school might act as an intervention to get a ‘good kid back on track’ was in many cases coupled with a sense of excitement that many participants reported having when they learned that they were to leave community and attend a ‘mainstream’ school:

A1 Well he saw me sort of dropping a little – I was failing, my attitude towards school wasn’t good, and I was in Year 10 so he said, oh I better get him out of there, because he knew that I would give it a red hot crack if I were to go down.

R. What did you want to get out of the experience?

A1 Something like... I didn’t really care... I just wanted to get down there and see what it might offer.. it didn’t really matter.

[A1, very remote]

The willingness to ‘give it a crack’ reoccurred in many interviews, but in many cases, it was coupled with a lack of any prior awareness about the realities of attending a highly academic school. Like this student, many had made a brief visit to their school as part of an orientation program, which would be rightly described as tokenistic. For this young man, it was a day-long visit, the afternoon of which was spent at a football carnival. In Bourdieuan terms, he could recognise the tangible aspects of the school as a social field; its big buildings and smart school uniform spoke to its wealth, but more difficult to detect were symbolic forms of capital that married together to create the school as a complex social field: the expectation for academic excellence and the pressure to ‘succeed’; euro-
centric appreciation of knowledge and culture; individualistic, competitive and achievement oriented goals that shaped everything from pedagogy to bed time.

- Attitudes to social dysfunction and questioning boarding policy

A number of participants from remote communities addressed head on the social dysfunction in their communities. Whereas some community leaders believed that boarding school is an effective mechanism to reshape social norms, others were strongly of the opinion that boarding schools should not be used as an excuse to avoid dealing with difficult social issues at home:

> The problem, and we need to fix it here at the local level, is that we need to strengthen our mob to deal with that … building our mob to make them stronger to deal with those things because those things will never end.  
> [P3, very remote]

It is interesting that of the older participants in this study, those who had been separated from their own cultural heritage as children, or whose languages had been eradicated through colonisation, were noticeably more likely to advocate for young people to leave community and attend boarding school. One father reflected:

> I think there’s a lot of myths out there that this is going to change our culture, change who we are, change our identity. No that’s a myth. What they’ve got to do is look around and say is this can strengthen that because at the moment we’re dysfunctional and we’re killing our culture and language and everything else through dysfunction. We’re not killing it through education.  
> [P3, very remote]

By contrast a number of senior elders in remote communities with a continuing language and cultural practices, who also highlighted community problems, challenged the perception that sending young ones away will solve problems that should be addressed directly. They were not against education in dominant cultural settings but many insisted that boarding school should not be used to deflect attention from problems in community. They argued that boarding school should not be applied as a Band-Aid solution to mask
serious social problems, or excuse parents from their parental duties. One senior leader argued:

Just because there are a lot of problems in the community, sniffing petrol, smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, kava, and breaking in, suicide – these things are happening in the community, and a lot of stealing cars and all that, and they do all these things, and then they say – listen, I’m going to send you to other school. I feel it’s just they want to send them away ... and then forget about them because ... they don’t want to… deal with the problem, yes that’s right. Because to me, the parents are weak to deal with the problem.

[P14, very remote]

All of the parents interviewed agreed that those members of society whose behaviours drag young people down should be held accountable:

A lot of Aboriginal people, and I speak for the community, it’s all rhetoric... yeah, we want our kids to get educated, but they don’t do what they say… Nobody’s turned around to the people, our mob, and said – well you need to do your bit too.

[P3, remote]

A number insisted that scarce resources would be better deployed if they focused on building capacity for young parents. Their concern echoed the testimony of those alumni participants who reported feeling that no one at home understood how to support them at school. This issue fed into a pattern of misunderstanding between home and school, where dissonant presumptions around who was responsible to offer what level of care left young people with no functional means of emotional support. One participant reflected:

I’m not sure about all this focus on educating the kids. It’s the parents we need to focus on, so they learn to parent their kids.

[P25, very remote]

A number of younger participants also cited community dysfunction, and several characterised their choice to attend boarding school as a sacrifice they were making in an
effort to improve the lives of extended family. One example of this is a young man from a regional community:

*Women were a big part of my life and a big part of my whole entire family’s life because that’s all we had. We had our grandmothers, an aunty and my mum. My dad wasn’t there, I didn’t really have any other father figures or male figures, so … I thought this would be an opportunity for me as a young man, I was growing into a young man, to be able to give something back to my family because my mum and my aunt and that had given so much to me.*

[A32, outer regional]

In this case, substance and domestic abuse were tearing his family apart. What appear as statistics in Chapter 1 were to this young man a daily lived reality, whether he was at home or not. His life story is a good illustration of what C. Wright Mills (1959) describes as ‘the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works’ (p4): the ‘personal troubles of the milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure’. This participant is from a community that has been ravaged by the process of colonisation, from the early days of white settlement (Flyn 2016) and through the various iterations of government policy described in previous chapters. The legacy of the past is writ large in the lives of current generations. It was the hope that through education he could effect change in the private ‘milieu’ of his family life that kept this young man at school, even in the face of pressure from family to return home. Whether his personal efforts could change the life course of loved ones seemingly being swept along on a torrent of social, historical, cultural, political and economic realities was another question altogether.

- Maximising leadership and academic potential

Some participants reported that their leadership or academic ability had recommended them for a place in boarding school, and that they had taken up a scholarship to further their aspirations:
I ... care about being highly educated too, like I have aspirations, I don’t just want to be a tradie or anything, I want to go to uni and stuff. And there’s a better opportunity for that up there rather than down here.

[A33, regional]

These young people recognised that they would only be empowered to change systems and confront injustice in society at large by achieving in the dominant culture’s education system. For them high-performing boarding schools constituted a pathway to higher education and full participation in Australian life:

It’s sort of the next step for all Aboriginal people in Australia – how do we get Aboriginal people into universities? What measures do we have to take? So the first step was to secure us in a good education, so high school at [boarding school], setting up a good programme ... to give us the strength to be able to go on, to show us the way – oh, wait, you don't just have to go home and just float off into nothing, there’s stuff out there for you.

[A19, remote]

This highlights the responsibility that schools bear for helping young people explore an imagined future within the context of their own communities, and to consider the skills and capabilities they require in order to enact it.

- **The promise of professional sport**

For another group, boarding school represented their best chance of breaking into professional sporting codes.

A majority of male participants, including those who later transitioned to higher education, reported that exploring their potential on the football field was their primary motivation for going away to school. Often first contact with their boarding school had occurred at a football carnival or through the agency of a football coach and these participants reported that their sporting prowess was what justified their position at school:
They saw me as a footballer rather than someone that was going to achieve anything in the academia side of things.

[A24, regional]

The correlation between the school’s perceived purpose in offering scholarships, and students’ understanding of their own position is interesting:

‘I thought I had like a purpose there, like I was playing good footy and stuff, but like for like other people, they used to refer to them as like a waste... like I don’t know if you’ve heard that term – like a waste of a scholarship.

[A33, regional]

For students whose primary goal was to be drafted into professional football, achievements in education were of secondary importance: even those who transitioned to university looked back with regret on their failure to attain sporting success:

‘I was hoping to get drafted as a rookie … I didn’t want to go back home straightaway because I felt like I’d failed, even though I’d finished school.’

[A1, very remote]

For many participants, their sporting prowess was important to them working from a strengths base at school. Some expressed it as a genuine contribution they could make, a way to ‘give back’ for everything they received. This has implications for learning and risks feeding into racial stereotypes, as well as the tendency for different domains of school life to be siloed, so that benefits in one area do not cross into others. These issues will be discussed in Part 3, but it is important to acknowledge here the body of literature which explores how the positioning of ‘Black’ (Harper 2015, Azzarito & Harrison 2008) and ‘Brown’ (Fitzpatrick 2013, Hokowhitu 2008) bodies as physical rather than intellectual can work to limit the potential of students of colour. While sporting success can build confidence, contribute to a young person’s bank of symbolic capital, and ultimately translate into qualifications or pathways to employment, it can also restrict the development of alternate identities (Fitzpatrick 2013, p158).
The choice of Boarding School for urban students

Five participants in this study were from urban environments and it is worth looking at them as a separate group insofar as they were unanimous in identifying boarding school as enabling academic success. Each of them reported that access to high performing independent schools had resulted in a higher level of academic attainment than would otherwise have been possible for them, notwithstanding having a number of other education options available to them.

Urban parents expressed frustration that schools and scholarship providers seem to overlook the benefits that might accrue to their young people through attending high-performing schools. Several wanted schools and scholarship providers to rethink funding priorities so that urban students might benefit more. They spoke passionately about the learning needs of First Australian young people living in cities and the frustration that this population is often overlooked for scholarship positions in high-end schools:

You know like in the past … there has been a real focus in providing opportunities for remote and regional Indigenous kids … [but] Indigenous disadvantage here in [state] is exactly the same as what it is in the NT and other parts of the country. … If I went around the … metropolitan area and picked up thirty houses and put them all beside one another, they would all look like a remote community, or like an Aboriginal mission, and the same disadvantage would be just as apparent ...

[P19, urban]

These participants described scholarship positions in high performing schools as providing life-changing opportunities for urban young people and insisted that any programs that enable urban First Australian children to access an elite educational experience are to be encouraged:

White private schools are there to provide education for families that are well off, that are able to send their children to that school, and with the costs of sending your children to these schools, then comes an expectation from the families that are able to afford to send their children to that school that the schools provide absolute best practice education to their students.

[P19, urban]
The benefits that accrue generally to students in the Independent school sector have been discussed in detail in previous chapters, but urban participants in this study clearly understood the transformational potential of high-end schools. They also understand the dynamic described by Kenway (2013) in her paper *Challenging inequity in Australian Schools* where she analyses the differential environments of two government and two independent schools in Geelong, Victoria:

‘These government and independent schools are in close geographical proximity, but the two sectors are educationally, socially, culturally and materially worlds apart. And my experience of researching in schools in both sectors suggests the high probability that students from the different sectors seldom mix for educational, sporting, cultural or social events; that they each largely stay in their respective cocoons (at least off line). Compounded advantage occurs alongside compounded disadvantage, but never the twain shall meet’ (p304).

Parents whose children had been enabled through scholarship programs to cross from one cocoon to the other reflected gratefully on the experience for their children:

> Well my daughter is probably a good example, she’s in Year 9, and she’s killing it, absolutely. She works her absolute backside off, but with the really good support of a fabulous school and she’s doing really, really well ... really well.

[P19, urban]

For some urban participants, boarding school was less about broaching entrenched social divides and more about being empowered to finish school and make choices over their life outcomes. A number of younger participants reported that for them boarding school represented freedom from the complexities of home life, and the opportunity to enjoy a living environment conducive to study:

> I had five brothers at home and a sister, and my youngest brother also has Down Syndrome, so there was a lot going on at home, and so they offered for me to board, which was really good for me because I needed my own space, and also there was no way I could have done Year 11 and 12.

[A21, urban]
When I became a boarder for Year 9, it was refreshing, like it was sort of I had a life on my own I guess where I wouldn’t have to worry about anything .... we also had like computers there we could study. At dad’s I didn’t have a computer. … and we had internet there so I could do my study, we had tutors, so it was sort of a win-win situation for being a boarder.

These practical benefits paid dividends: both of these young people attributed their subsequent success at university to the learning conditions they enjoyed at boarding school.

Summary of parent/alumni reasons for attending boarding school

Motivation for parents, communities and alumni attending boarding schools fell into five main categories:

- the quality and availability education alternatives in home communities;
- to challenge young people and extend their horizons;
- a desire to protect young people from problems and norms in their home community;
- maximising leadership and academic outcomes; and
- the opportunity to break into professional sporting codes.

Many participants spoke about the life-changing opportunities that they perceived would flow from access to a first class education at an Independent school, including post-school pathways that they would otherwise be outside their reach. Despite this, and consistent with the work of Guenther, Disbray & Osborne (2015), Year 12 completion and transition to higher education was more relevant to schools, than it was to parents, communities or alumni participants.

Conclusion

One of the sub-questions of this thesis is what constitutes ‘success’ for participants. The AIEF Compendium (2015) defines success as ‘Year 12 completion and a successful
transition to a sustainable career’ (p14), but participants in this study reported seeking a range of quite different objectives.

The antonym of ‘success’ is ‘failure’. Where students do not reach benchmarks, or attain outcomes deemed by institutions or policy makers to be ‘successful’ the implication is that they have failed. The consequences of a young person internalising this message has flow-on effects for their self-concept. Associated mental health outcomes are a salient concern (Haswell 2013). Where the education objectives of parents, students, schools and policy makers are discrepant, measures of ‘success’ should be refined to ensure that young people are validated and encouraged in their learning journey.

The three chapters that make up Part 3 (following) focus on the issues that participants identified as constraining their engagement and attainment at school, and prevented them from achieving their desired outcomes.
Part 3

Constraining education engagement and success
Introduction to Part 3

One of the early interviews I conducted was with an old man in a very remote community in the Northern Territory. He had been stolen from his family as a baby and never met them again. He reflected:

I’m not sure whether I cried… I was too young. I’m not sure when they took me away from my parents. Well the nuns there looked after me … and then when I was big enough I was let out.

He had worked every day of his adult life, in the pre-war years on Japanese pearl luggers. This man would rightly be described as visionary. He had devoted his life to creating economic opportunity for the community that he had come to call his own. He had played a pivotal role in creating local educational options, although he had a host of children and grandchildren who had left community to attend boarding schools regionally and ‘down south’. When I told him about this project he was immediately on the front foot:

My main concern is that within five or ten years that they’ve have someone with flying colours, but this is not happening. It’s just a concern I have… you know … a person that’s passed through all the exams… but no-one’s doing it. Now my concern is we’re not there. I don’t know where it is … Where to put the finger, to have our kids there with the same level of education that you have.

The answer to his concerns is not straightforward. Factors that respectively constrain or enable First Australian young people in boarding schools inevitably reflect a combination of subjective and objective factors. The personal dispositions and circumstances that a student brings to school are important, but so too are dispositions intrinsic to school and home communities and the extraneous circumstances of both home life and communal life in the boarding house. Although Bourdieu himself does not use the term ‘institutional habitus’, modern Bourdieuan scholars argue that the concept of collective or institutional habitus provides a valuable socio-analytical tool to understand the interactions between
individuals, groups and institutions within the wider sociological landscape of modern society (Burke, Emmerich & Ingram 2013, p19). In light of the interwoven constituents at play in any given narrative, interview data in this study were analysed with a constant view to the intersection between biography, history and social structure. This ‘double vision’ (Lareau 2001) informs the findings presented in the following chapters.

The chapters in Part 3 will present findings on what participants identified as constraining their education engagement, attainment and in some cases, school completion. Part 4 chapters will report on factors that enabled them to persevere and attain positive outcomes from their time in boarding school in the short, medium or longer term. Part 5 reports on the outcomes that participants describe as flowing from their time at boarding school, and problematises the notion of ‘success’.

In relation to the factors that participants describe as constraining education engagement and attainment, the themes of homesickness, racism and trauma emerged as issues that, respectively or in concert, impeded the education experience of many research participants. Interviewees provided divergent and sometimes contradictory accounts of how each issue manifested, but through the data analysis process, patterns became apparent that are reported here. These extend understandings of each issue as currently described in the literature and provide empirical evidence to support propositions that have hitherto been described in hypothetical terms.
Chapter 6

Homesickness


In his study of the transition experiences of Aboriginal students to boarding schools in Western Australia, Mander (2015a) describes homesickness as ‘an ever-present risk that undermined Aboriginal students’ experience at boarding school’ (p320). Similarly, AIEF (2015) describe homesickness as an ‘inevitability’ for students, and especially new students, irrespective of their community of origin:

‘It's exactly the same, whether they come from Toowoomba or Moree, the girls feel the same way. They miss Mum and Dad. They miss their community collectively. One of the big things we do is keep them busy so a really good orientation program where there’s activities every day and things on after school so they’re not sitting in their room feeling sad’ (p110).

They acknowledge that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, homesickness may present a serious problem and that they need support, including support from parents and home communities. The priority is framed as keeping students at school through ‘this critical transition period’ when there is a heightened risk that they will drop out (p111). This is consistent with literature identifying homesickness as a transient affliction that dissipates over time (Cree 2000).

Although homesickness is common amongst boarders, research does not explore in depth the ways that sufferers understand or even explain their experience of it. Generally, ‘homesickness’ is understood as ‘pining for home’, ‘missing home’ or being ‘depressed by absence from home’ (Fisher 1984, Mander 2012). Mander (2012) reports that participants in his study described psychosomatic symptoms; separation distress; and, grief and loss as expressions of homesickness (p ii). This was consistent with research that correlates a longing for home, familiar places and people with a range of psychological problems manifesting in children and adolescents (Thurber 1999). Mander
found that for some informants in his study, homesickness was a constant that remained with them for the duration of their time away (p154).

A number of participants in this study reflected on how they experienced homesickness personally or how they observed homesickness affecting those around them. Several indicated that the term encompasses much more than a yearning for home and expressed frustration that nobody, either at home or at school, seemed to understand their plight. Some reported that they chose to tell schools they were homesick as a way of explaining a range of difficult circumstances. Others reported that schools assumed symptoms of distress were caused by homesickness, whereas in reality a variety of factors were at play. Their reflections are useful in helping to unpack the complex emotions, cultural expectations and pressures that engendered responses covered by the umbrella term ‘homesickness’. From participants’ accounts, it is clear that the relatively benign associations of the term as currently described in the literature are inadequate to capture the depth and persistence of suffering many young people endure. This extends current understandings of homesickness.

This chapter will address a series of issues that participants described by reference to the descriptor ‘homesick’. It will begin by looking at homesickness during the period of transition to school, as described by teacher participants, and as recounted by alumni from different geographic regions and cultural backgrounds. It will then present findings on how deeper and more enduring problems were passed off (and therefore perceived by participants to have been underestimated) by schools as ‘homesickness’.

**Homesickness, transition and informed choice**

Transition to a new school always requires a period of adjustment, and this is especially the case in boarding school, where unfamiliar routines and expectations cover every dimension of life (Cree 2000). Homesickness as traditionally described is a common reaction, not unique to Indigenous students leaving home for the first time. One boarding house master described his experience of working in an elite boys’ boarding school:
I mean sometimes when I was on shift in the boarding house at night-time you know I’d be sitting there doing the notes and all the lights would be off, but you would hear this sobbing coming from different rooms from time to time of these thirteen year olds missing their parents.

Although he later described particular challenges the First Australian students in his boarding house faced, to this participant it was evident that the ‘shock of the new’ was traumatic regardless of family, community or cultural background. He did not dwell on what measures were in place to assist students in acclimatising. Although schools typically provide orientation programs for new students, a number of participants in this project started school outside of major intake periods, and therefore missed standard induction processes.

Few key participants remember being transitioned into boarding school beyond what was offered to all new students, even though they might have been moving from very remote communities, and had a language background other than English. Some reported attending camps run by scholarship providers, but felt that these were quite distinct from school as such, and only partially useful in preparing for what they would encounter at boarding school. By contrast, in-school transition programs that aided in the socialisation process were generally reported to be helpful. One young man reflected on the benefits of an off-campus Year 9 transition program attended by all students, which enabled him to showcase his strengths and establish relationships within the peer group. Similarly, others had already spent time at the boarding school as part of an inter-school exchange program and reported that this had enabled them to make informed decisions about leaving home to enroll as a student of the school.

Participants reported that the lack of an effective and holistic transition program had implications not only for the initial period of adjustment to school life, but also to their longer term sense of purpose. Many had very little idea of what going to boarding school

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11 His experience is explicated at length as Case Study 4 in Part 4, Chapter 11.
would entail. Where participants reported making a fleeting visit to their new school for an interview and school tour, many remember having taken very little in.

All we saw was the way … they were dressed, … the buildings… [The school] flew us down with my mum for an interview and a little written test, and that went well and we got to watch the [football carnival] and everything, and then after that we had a meeting and they said do you want to come down in two weeks to finish off the semester, or come back next semester, and I was like, I’ll come back straightaway. So that was when I came down there. I went up, packed my bags, and told [local school] that I was going.

[A1, very remote]

When asked what they recalled from these visits, many other participants also spoke about how they were struck by school uniforms, or the size of the school, which in the case of participants from remote areas were sometimes larger than their home communities. In Bourdieuan (1986) terms, while these young people were able to appreciate tangible aspects of the field such as buildings or uniforms, they were unequipped to detect intangible, or *symbolic*, forms of capital that, taken together, made up the world of the school. Participants described these as including the pressure to excel and other individual aspirational ideals; cultural norms such as the way people speak to each other (how loudly and how ‘politely’); the diet they eat; the music they listen to; the affluence of their homes; and the holidays they would go on with their families over the school breaks. It was only after he arrived as a student at the school that the young man quoted above [A1] came to appreciate that he ‘did not belong there’. He explained: ‘it was too upper class for me, ’cause I’m from a community and we don’t really have that way’ [A1, very remote]. Other participants had similar experiences: they too identified school culture as having made them feel like outsiders. A number reported that although they adjusted to practical aspects of school life over time, the cultural dissonance between home and school heightened their longing for home where they enjoyed an unspoken understanding of community values and priorities. A number described feeling themselves change, and this threatened for them what Friedman (2016) describes as ‘the ontological coherence of self’. Personal growth and transformation, which is ultimate object of education,
engendered for them ‘hidden injuries’ (Sennett & Cobb 1977) of unease, anxiety and dislocation (Friedman 2016).

Not all participants in this study experienced homesickness to a significant degree. Consistent with literature that describes it as a transient affliction, others reported adjusting to boarding house and school life worlds over time. One young man from an urban background, asked what he’d like to say to schools, responded:

… if an Indigenous person doesn’t like the boarding house at first, it’s probably just homesickness, they will end up adapting and … it will be fun in the end

[A28, urban]

Others corroborated this, and identified a number of factors that assisted in the process of adjusting to school life. These included the proximity of family and friends, or the support offered by staff and others at school:

I remember the first day when mum left, I was just crying like how could you do this and leave me here? - because the boarding house was right in the middle of the school, so it was like living at the school. But … I made some really great friends and I became really close with the teachers, which was a huge... it just made all the difference I think.

[A12, very remote]

Whereas literature suggests that keeping young people busy is effective in dealing with homesickness during periods of transition (AIEF 2015, p110), participants in this study were much more likely to name relational factors as enabling them to settle into a new way of life. This finding has implications for both schools and scholarship providers.

Homesickness, country and the distance from home

Whereas other issues that participants described as constraining their engagement and attainment at school were common to alumni regardless of their family background, homesickness was notably less severe for those from urban backgrounds. Although it
sometimes raised other issues, proximity to home was consistently described by participants as a protective factor against homesickness.

A number of participants lived relatively close to school and had chosen to board for the educational advantages that enabled. While this sometimes created tensions both in and out of the boarding house, a number of urban participants commented on how much they appreciated being able to focus more closely on their studies, and with better supports, all the while remaining close to home. When they were feeling lost or lonely, family members were close by, and when there were problems at home, they were well positioned to respond. For this group, language and the practical aspects of adjusting to city life did not present as problems. Some identified school as the place that they learned about their cultural heritage, and this contributed to the pride they felt in their achievements and their loyalty to the school. Of all participants, those from urban communities were most likely to reflect on boarding school as a place where they were able to pursue their educational ambitions without anxiety. One young man described feeling ‘free’ when he was at school¹²:

> When I became a boarder for Year 9, it was refreshing, like it was sort of I had a life on my own I guess where I wouldn’t have to worry about anything … For me, like knowing my family was so close, like I wouldn’t worry about anything [laugh]. So that was another big thing about being a boarder, your family are really close.

[A28, urban]

Of the urban participants in this study all had progressed to tertiary education and were adamant that this would not have been possible had they remained living at home and attending their local school.

To the extent that this supports a finding that participants reported homesickness as being mitigated by proximity to home, this begs the question of how homesickness is alleviated

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¹² This participant’s narrative is presented at length in Chapter 10, and is used to challenge the proposition that young people can only thrive at boarding school with the active support and ongoing involvement of parents.
for students from remote Australia. Participants from remote or very remote communities often described ‘homesickness’ by reference to a sense of separation from country, which they claimed as being essential to their strength and resilience:

You know when anything’s wrong you just go out into the country and you just feel like the land heals you [laugh].

[A12, very remote]

… the ten or eleven weeks of time that you’re in boarding school, it gives you that craving … of coming back to country … [it] is also inside within you, you feel the calling of the land and the culture calling you back, and it’s where I get my strength from.

[A10, very remote]

Some participants cited the separation from country as the reason that they dropped out of school. Their experience highlights the importance of continuing to provide high quality, culturally responsive, place-based educational programs for young people from remote Australia (Altman 2012, Fogarty 2015, Schwab 2015). At the same time, the challenge for boarding schools working with remote students is to find ways to support cultural connections to land and family so that students remain firmly rooted in the aspects of life and culture that make them strong. The AIEF Compendium (2015) observes:

‘If a school sources enrolments from one community or region, it makes sense for that school to invest in developing relationships with key contacts in that community… For some schools, especially those sourcing applications and enrolments from across the country, deep relationships with communities are less significant’ (p56).

This advice runs the risk of encouraging schools to see First Australian students through an essentialising lens, where the distinctive cultural identity that sustains them becomes divorced from their school experience. By contrast, schools around Australia are increasingly recognising the two-way benefits that flow from building authentic, reciprocal relationships with remote communities (O'Bryan 2015). While the quote above claims that deep relationships with individual communities may not be significant to mainstream schools, for isolated young people a long way from home, the testimonies of
participants in this study suggest that those connections contributed to wellbeing and were fundamental to their engagement and ‘success’ at school and even at university.

Homesickness and personal agency

While some alumni participants had made an active choice to attend boarding school, others reflected that they had little say in the decision. Data suggest that when they had been sent away to school against their will or with no real idea of what to expect, typically for one of the reasons described in the previous chapter, this had implications for how they dealt with the separation from home, as well as for academic endeavour and social integration at school. It is not possible to draw a causal connection between an individual’s agency in choosing to attend boarding school and particular social or academic outcomes that eventuated, but it is interesting to reflect on how participants described the part they played in deciding to attend boarding school and what that meant for their own hopes and ambitions at school.

Some interviewees were adamant that the choice to leave home to attend school had been entirely theirs, whereas others recounted how little say they had in the matter. Some had been asked to choose between given alternatives; others were presented with an ultimatum from their parents. Some had a clear understanding of what they were about to embark on, whereas others felt utterly unprepared for the experience. In the words of one young woman:

In Year 7, my mum kind of sent me off to the shops saying, oh can you get some bread and milk, you’re going to boarding school, and don’t forget the butter. So she kind of threw in that I was going to go to boarding school.

[A13, very remote]

At the time of being interviewed, this young woman was grateful that her parents had persisted in their determination that she should be educated at boarding school, but this was not the case for all participants. For some, the lack of ‘buy in’ they had in the decision to attend a boarding school set up an oppositional mindset that was evident even years after they had left school.
A number of participants from remote and very remote home communities reported that the ability to exercise agency over their ongoing education decisions meant that homesickness did not cause distress, although it was a factor influencing their longer-term education outcomes. In particular, the freedom to make decisions about how long they stayed ‘away’ at school was significant. Here the different objectives people from remote and very remote areas sought through boarding schools were apparent:

I only experienced homesick once, … it didn’t really bother me much, but … it did occur to me at one stage, and I said, hey I’ve been away from home for a long time… more than 200 days a year- three years away … having the impact of the mainstream on you … it gives you that craving of coming back to country… something that is also inside within you, you feel the calling of the land and the culture calling you back, and that’s where I get my strength from… I had to go back.

This participant elected to return home at a given point in his secondary school years. He did not finish Year 12. Later in life he returned to education and completed a teacher training course through a regional institute. He was proud that he had returned home and was ‘making use of his educated brain’. His experience affirms Biddle & Cameron’s (2012) research which found that Indigenous Australians appear to be engaging in education as mature-age students. At the time of being interviewed this participant was in his thirties, running a very remote Homeland school and working to develop economic and employment opportunities that might attract a larger number of family members to return home. His own children attended a regional boarding school, where he said he was able to keep them culturally strong and connected to country. In relation to his own education he reported feeling in control of his choices, and satisfied with them. He justified prioritising culture and family over Western norms, and expressed pride in the strength of his connection to language and culture.

By contrast a number of participants spoke about the emotions associated with realising that they were powerless to determine their own destiny. One participant gave an
interesting perspective on the issue of personal agency. For him, a perceived loss of power to make decisions over his own life meant that over time homesickness assumed a more pernicious aspect. Whereas at first homesickness took the form of feeling like an outsider at school because ‘it was too upper class for me’ [A1, very remote], later he came to feel that the choice to be there was no longer his:

I didn’t want to be at [boarding school] after I had a kid. I wanted to go back and look after the kid and help the mother out, but then they said … no, it will be better for you to be here and finish school because it will be good for your kid as well. But then I felt like I was missing out on my kid growing up, and that was hard.

[A1, very remote]

This case provides an interesting perspective on the issue of teenage pregnancy discussed in Chapter 1. Had this participant been female, it is highly unlikely that the same logic would have been applied in the school’s instance that education should take priority over childcare, even given that culturally inscribed patterns of parenting may have made this possible. Parenthood frequently limits the educational engagement of young women in remote communities (Senior & Chenhall 2012), but little research attention has been paid to the impact that parenthood has on the engagement of young men. In this case, the new father felt that the school’s insistence that education should take the highest priority meant he had no say over major life decisions:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>I was going to go up for the birth, but they wouldn’t let me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Who didn’t let you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>The school because they thought I was going to not come back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>They didn’t let you go to the birth of your own son?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>No, ‘cause they thought that I was going to stay and they didn’t want that, which is most likely what would have happened.</td>
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Because his then girlfriend did not understand why he had not returned to support her and the baby, their relationship eventually broke down. He reported that since that time his
contact with his son has been sporadic at best. This belied the school’s assertions that by staying away from home he was creating a brighter future for his little boy. Indeed, the social and emotional cost of education was exponentially higher for him than for his peers, and for him this called into question the very purpose of having left home in the first place. He responded by withdrawing into himself: he remembered that he ‘used to sleep a lot when [he] was sad’ or that he would meet up with another of the Indigenous students and sit with him ‘on the brick pavement’ because it was the ‘hottest’ part of the campus. A disturbing aspect of his account is how little he felt the school sought to understand his situation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R</th>
<th>Do you think that people at [boarding school] understood how you were being pulled in two directions at that time?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Did they ask you about that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>No, they didn’t go into depth with that stuff. They just sort of saw that I was happy outside and was running fast and playing footy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>They were interested in your football and your running?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Yeah. Like they thought I was happy, but most of the time I wasn’t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Yeah, and no-one ever sat you down and asked whether you were happy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>No. It was pretty like full on too... it was like a lot of pressure on us.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This young man reported becoming increasingly depressed over his time at boarding school, and along with a number of other participants responded by developing a number of maladaptive behaviours, in particularly drinking heavily ‘when [he] realised that the future wasn’t looking like [he] wanted it to be’. This is consistent with the findings of Cheng & Mallinckrodt (2015) who describe Hispanic/Latino college students who experience racial/ethnic discrimination as being at risk of developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress and increased maladaptive alcohol use. This young man reported that his friend, also a young father, used to drink to excess while he was a boarder, explaining ‘He didn’t drink because he was pressured. He just drank because he knew what he wanted anyway’. For both, the lack of power to determine their own life course when
major life events were happening at home, and when being at school prevented them from playing their rightful role, had serious ramifications for their mental health.

Homesickness, belonging, and relationships at home

A number of young people interviewed were very anxious to explain exactly what they were missing when people presumed that they were ‘just homesick’ [A6, very remote]. In particular, participants from remote or very remote communities spoke of longing for socio-cultural norms that they saw as fundamentally incompatible with boarding school life. Cuervo & Wyn (2014) argue that the metaphor of ‘belonging’ is apposite in youth research because it reveals ‘youth as a social process’(p3). Whereas ‘transition’ is an essentially spatial term, ‘belonging’ brings the nature and quality of social relationships and connections into focus (p3). The description of what one participant identified as being ‘homesick’ for illustrates the centrality of ‘belonging’ in her life and the disjuncture between the role of ‘family’ in her life and in the lives of her western schoolmates:

So the people who I interacted with in [city] were kids who had a “stable” home life. Mum and dad in the home, just one or two siblings, their own rooms, you know working parents ... the family consisted of just the immediate family – so mum, dad and kids kind of thing, whereas in the community, I lived with my dad, my aunties, my dad’s brothers, my dad’s sisters, my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, her brothers and sisters, their children, their grandchildren, and we all lived in one house, and all the kids played together and we’d all hunt together, and at night time, when the sun went down, we’d all go to the oval together, and we would walk around the oval ‘til all hours of the morning, and that was just the done thing in the community... When I spoke about this with other Indigenous students from Indigenous communities around Australia, we all have that in common. So we were all doing the same sorts of things. It was like it was a community, like a remote Indigenous community teenage culture.

[A6, very remote]

Her description accords almost word for word with that given by Senior & Chenhall (2012). Those authors identify a number of problems that attach to the socio-cultural
norms they describe, but for this participant, relationality, as embodied in ‘remote Indigenous community teenage culture’, was of paramount importance. The dissonance in priorities between school (with a nuclear family at the centre of the picture) and home (with an extended family and closely connected community) went to the essence of who she was. This had implications for how she interacted at school. Like the young man above [A1, very remote], her reaction was to seek out other students whose life experience mirrored her own. These girls became her peer group and they are the only people with whom she remained in contact after leaving school.

Whereas this young woman had a group of friends at school, many key participants reported feeling socially isolated. Over time ‘homesickness’ merged with the more enduring question of where they felt they belonged. This was a recurring theme; for many participants, the adaptations they were required to make as a means of surviving at school contributed to them feeling like an outsider both at home and at school:

> It made it a lot harder to go home sometimes because when you’re in…. ‘cause the town I’m from, it’s mostly populated by Indigenous people, it’s mostly populated by families. So they have a very set lifestyle, … whereas in boarding school and in this Western society that I had to move into and live in for five years, and even continuing now, it’s hard ‘cause you have to completely relearn a new culture, you have to completely relearn everything that you’ve already been taught.

[A13, remote]

Immersion in a dominant cultural environment wrought changes that participants identified as leading to social isolation and rejection when they returned home. This was the case even for participants from urban families, and confirms research that social class is as powerful in transforming students’ lives as is exposure to different academic standards and norms (hooks 1994). One young woman who returned home every weekend explained how her relationships within the family changed by dint of living in the boarding house:

> I’d get into a lot more arguments with my siblings at home because of the stuff I was … being told was right in the boarding house. So if they weren’t saying
please or thank you, or if they weren’t cleaning up after themselves, I would get so angry, and I would be like you should be doing this … this is not respectable, … this is not right you know, because it started to become ingrained in me that you had to live a life in a certain way to be respectable.

As she sought to impose white cultural norms on her younger siblings, they reacted with predictable vigour, and she reported that her relationship with them became strained:

…they sort of said that I’d changed a lot, and they just didn’t like me for a long time… for the next couple of years I had a strained relationship with my siblings.’

Her choice of the word ‘respectable’ and the concept that there are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of going about basic aspects of life suggests that for her, social norms had been elevated to the status of moral imperatives. She gave the example of meal time in the boarding house. She confessed that she habitually ate too fast, a fact that she attributed to sharing a family meal table with five hungry brothers who had no qualms in stealing food from her plate. This became an issue at school, where girls told her that rushing her food was ‘not good for you’. Feeling that they were ‘being mean’, she remembered having to learn to adapt ‘really quickly’ to ‘being a polite, respectful human being, which I wasn’t used to at all’. Her words accord closely with those of Marie Battiste (2013) who invites her readers to reflect on the realities of assimilation from a personal perspective:

Imagine the consequence of a powerful ideology that positions one group as superior and gives away First Nations peoples’ lands and resources and invites churches and other administrative agents to inhabit their homeland, while negating their very existence and finally removing them from the Canadian landscape to lands no one wants. Imagine how uncertain a person whose success is only achieved by a complete makeover of themselves, by their need to speak English and the polished rules and habits that go with that identity. They are thrust into a society that does not want them to show too much success or too much Indian identity, losing their connections to their land, family, and community when they have to move away as there is no work in their homeland. Assimilation.

(p23).
Some participants described the thought processes required in deciding on how much they were prepared to assimilate at school. The words of one young man show a mature understanding of this reality:

You’re kind of living with the most wealthiest people [...] they are the most... they’re the highest class, and … you’ve got to figure out where you belong because … you got to school with them, but you don’t really belong there…

[A33, regional]

For others, and particularly for participants who attended boarding school from a young age, ‘figuring out where you belong’ was easier said than done. For those who experienced lateral violence when they went home, the trauma of being rejected by close family members remained a source of distress even years after leaving school. Their testimony highlights the importance of staff working with families to ensure that education remains a joint enterprise between home and school. It also points to the unfairness of assuming that school refusal or other resistant behaviours are the outworking of a simple case of ‘homesickness’. The reflections of one young man vividly illustrate the distress of being misunderstood at home as well as at school:

Yeah... when mum called me a white cunt, she told me to fuck off back to [Capital City] and be with my white family, and said that I didn’t love her or I didn’t love the kids, my brothers and my sisters, that hurt, I got really upset.... it hurt and it still does because to know that mum actually thinks that of me, and to hear her actually say it, it still does play in my mind now.

[A32, regional]

Whatever hurt her comments might have occasioned, the brutality of this mother’s rejection speaks evocatively to the distress and pain she must also have experienced, as she perceived her son being pulled further and further away from her by his time at school. In this case, the participant had been encouraged to go to boarding school by staff at his primary school, and when he was offered a scholarship his mother had been very dubious about allowing him to take it up. Her sense of losing her oldest son to the White, outside
world, permeated his narrative. His account provides insight into the emotional cost for young people and their families of going to boarding school\textsuperscript{13}.

As they assimilated to different social norms at school, many participants described how they found it harder and harder to fit in at home. In the words of one participant, being at boarding school in the city ‘changes the way you do now’ [A1, very remote]. Homesickness manifests as a yearning to belong, but home no longer satisfies that desire. Having seen what is ‘out there’ home assumes a different aspect. This young man readily admitted ‘I’m most comfortable when I’m back in the community’ but felt he could not return there ‘cause you can live there when you’re about to die, and it would still be the same... nothing will change’ [A1, very remote]. This had left him trying to establish a life in a regional centre, which he described as his ‘halfway point’. Unsure of what to do next and at a ‘crazy’ point in his life, this young man saw most hope in the fact that he was still young.

Homesickness and the abrogation of responsibilities to loved ones at home

The tension raised in the extracts above has implications for those working with First Australian students in boarding schools. Far beyond being a transient affliction and a normal part of transitioning to life away from home, many participants were at pains to explain that what schools understand by homesickness fails to take into account different social situations, cultural norms and the responsibilities that they had within their families and communities. Where being away at school meant that boarders were unable to fulfil obligations to loved ones, they described being consumed by the internal conflict that that occasioned.

When asked to explain what ‘homesickness’ meant, many described the term by reference to socio-cultural structures that occasioned different responsibilities. For them, their sense of loss and yearning came not from missing home or people, but from being prevented from fulfilling obligations they owed to loved ones at home:

\textsuperscript{13} This young man’s account is considered in more detail in Chapters 7.2 and 10 (below).
I think something that they don’t understand is there’s different dynamics. We’re not calling our family because we are homesick... we’re not only just homesick, but some of us actually have different relationships with our parents, like our kinship is stronger and different in many ways.

[A20, urban]

So vital are these relationships, that trauma may result from their neglect:

A lot of the time … you’re taking people away from communities who suffer a lot … and it’s so frustrating to try and explain that. Like that is their only connection to family, … we’re not talking about a daughter who has come from a farm and both her parents have an alright relationship and they’re calling up and like yeah, this is what’s wrong, but it’s alright, it’s fine darling, don’t worry. You know some Indigenous families, these girls are getting calls up and they are just as much as the support person as their mother or their cousin or their aunty or their uncle, and it is really like emotionally burdensome

[A20, urban]

A number of young people interviewed referenced issues of addiction and family violence at home. While they recognised that boarding school gave them a safe haven, they clearly felt a deep sense of guilt about leaving home and many participants reported that this went unrecognised. This was a message that they urgently wanted conveyed to schools. Indeed, the lack of understanding that staff had of complex home dynamics was a recurring theme, and one that participants a few years out of school spoke about with passion:

No-one understood anything. Everyone just thought that I’d go home because I was missing home and ... or women .... sometimes I’d just make up lies and say I’m just missing home, or sometimes I’d tell them what’s actually going on, but there’s only certain people that I really spoke to in detail about what was really going on at home.

[A32, regional]

In the words of one young woman the thought of not being able to help her mother when she was at risk was ‘beyond distressing’. She spoke about these feelings as manifestations
of homesickness, perhaps because her behaviour was presumed by schools to be an outworking of the same. She summed up this lack of understanding by declaring:

You’re not the child whose parents are going to take care of you, there’s a whole different dynamic to Indigenous families, and I’m talking you know... I’m not trying to discriminate. I know people are different, but predominantly there’s different dynamics. Like my sisters – I’m not their mother, but when they were brought up I was like their mother. Like my step mum was never not their mother, but I was taking care of them, changing nappies, carrying them, helping her out – that’s just the role I played. So if I was to ever get a phone call up and it was something... that I was distraught about and I had to … hang up my phone because the housemothers needed it, it’s beyond distressing.

[A20, urban]

Homesickness as generally understood sometimes connotes a degree of weakness: an inability to adapt, or a tendency to sentimentality. The accepted wisdom is that if we can keep young people busy in the first few weeks, they will get over it and get on with life at school. By contrast, statements like those quoted here speak to young people having a degree of maturity, and sense of adult responsibility that is at odds with school expectations and protocols. I asked one young man, who was already a father, whether rules in the boarding house frustrated him, given that he was well aware of the adult responsibilities he had at home. He replied that having to submit to school authority ‘didn’t bother me because I didn’t see them [his partner and child] playing a role here’ [A1, very remote]. Implicit in this comment is that while he was away at school he was also not playing a role in their lives. He went on to confess that ‘That’s all that I’d think about’.

Urban participants reflected on the dual burden of responsibility to put effort into academic pursuits but still discharge duties at home. While they appreciated that their peers did not bear the same responsibilities, participants did not describe their ongoing role at home in negative terms, or suggest that the role they played within the family diminished their commitment to education:
My mum’s done an amazing job with all of us, but of course … being the oldest girl in the family, I’ve sort of been that other parent for my younger siblings. And so, not that she ever put this responsibility on me, but I always felt like I needed to help mum out, and … go home on the weekends and check that everything was okay.

Despite the extra demands on these students relative to their schoolmates, being positioned to play an on-going role in family life was never described as something that participants would have preferred to avoid.

Where schools did not engage with the complex dynamics that circumscribed their lives, young people described feeling trapped in a vortex of misunderstanding. One young man’s testimony speaks directly to the cost to young people when schools fail to engage closely with all the complexity of a student’s home situation:

Within my family I’m seen as the rock, … having family members ringing me and telling me that this is going on … I feel as if I’m obligated to step in and do something for my family, and they feel that if something happens to my brother or my cousin you know, automatically it’s just you need to do something… it’s not just, can you help? It’s you have to do this because it’s family and family’s everything, and … that’s where I got in trouble a few times because I’d go home on weekends and I wouldn’t come back for a week or so because I’m just dealing with family problems, and getting caught up in it … And I mean it was just so complicated… No-one understood anything. Everyone just thought that I’d go home because I was missing home …

The data suggest that normalising homesickness, and describing it as an innocuous and transitory part of the boarding school experience ran the risk of masking significant challenges that many alumni described. Misunderstanding the nature and gravity of phenomena currently covered by the umbrella term of ‘homesickness’ works to absolve
schools from taking a more holistic and communitarian approach to supporting First Australian students at school.

**Recognising homesickness**

If schools do not recognise homesickness in its more problematic incarnations, they are ill equipped to either address underlying problems or appropriately manage symptoms that may threaten to derail education endeavours. It was clear from participants’ testimonies that homesickness impacted both their application to learning and their behaviour at school:

> If you’re having family problems and you come away from the boarding house, it’s not as easy to get away from those family problems, and that affects you in school and with your relationships and how you may obey the rules… It was so hard as a student … the only way that I could express myself was what they consider to rebel, to speak when not spoken to, to act out, to be cheeky or disrespectful, but that’s really the only way that I could...

[A20, urban]

Participants felt that if staff had understood what lay behind their disruptive or avoidance behaviours, it would have opened the way for schools to handle those issues in appropriate ways, rather than students being characterised as unruly or disrespectful. Testament to their strength of feeling, several alumni participants had gone to great lengths to return in a mentoring/advocacy role to their boarding school ‘and actually being what [they] didn’t get at school’ [A20, urban].

**Implications of homesickness**

When homesickness is understood in the wider frame described above, it becomes apparent that any failure to engage with the full circumstances of a young person’s life runs the risk of leaving them vulnerable to a range of detrimental outcomes. The risk of school dropout pales in comparison to the consequences described by participants in this study. Accounts of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation or attempted suicides highlight
the need for schools to develop relationships with students, families, and communities so that young people are supported in holistic and culturally appropriate ways.

Whereas education is cited as a social determinant of health, findings presented here suggest that where school results in the weakening or severance of relationships at home, the consequences for young people have serious implications for their wellbeing. A number of participants reflected on this. They reported internalising the conflict between discrepant values, priorities and responsibilities at home and school. One young man described how he had begun to think of hurting himself in Year 8, and how a ‘little voice’ of hope had sustained him for several years. By Year 12 the combined and opposing pressures from home and school became too much to resist:

> You know I’d be thinking in my head to do certain things to myself like going to hang myself or you know hurt myself in some way, or run away just to be alone anywhere, ... I think that … the only reason that really kept me at [Boarding School] was I don’t know, this little voice in the back of my head telling me all the positive things that could come from everything, but then eventually that voice wasn’t there anymore, and that’s when I couldn’t stick it out at [Boarding School] anymore because, like I said, family problems and then I had expectations from school.

[A32, regional]

He was one of a significant minority of participants to confide their attempts at suicide, or their suicidal ideation, and their accounts are sobering. His statement that he wanted to ‘run away just to be alone anywhere’ is a salient reminder of how consuming and inescapable the emotions associated with ‘homesickness’ can be.

**Conclusion**

The data presented here suggests that homesickness arises relationally for First Australian boarders. Rather than an atomistic model that perceives homesickness as emerging from a longing for people or place, the narratives here indicate that for many young people, homesickness went to the heart of belonging. Their accounts embody *nostaglia* in the literal sense of the Latin word: a ‘sickness’ for what it is to ‘be us’.
Whereas homesickness has been described as a transitory affliction the effects of which dissipate over time, participants here report that the term covers a range of complex issues. These can become more pronounced the longer a student is away from home. They include loss of language and culture; assimilation to different social norms; the diminution of connections at home, and worry about the failure to fulfill responsibilities to loved ones; a sense of losing control over life choices; and the conviction that nobody, either at home or at school, understands their situation.
Chapter 7

Encountering cultural dissonance, racial stereotypes and racism at school

Freedom from racism is recognised as a basic human right (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948), but increasingly Australians are being exhorted to face the reality that racism is knitted into the very fabric of post-colonial society (Grant 2016, Bradley 2015, Paradies 2007, HREOC 1991). In their 1991 National Inquiry into Racist Violence in Australia, the Human Rights Commission\(^\text{14}\) found that racial violence against First Australian individuals was endemic in every state and territory in Australia and was a societal issue rather than isolated acts of maladjusted individuals (p213). Twenty-five years later, racism was again cited as one of the reasons that First Australian women are thirty-four times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of violence than other Australians (Quiggin 2016). Literature emphasises the detrimental effects of racism on the whole of society (Nussbaum 2010, HREOC 1991, Paradies 2008), but particularly pertinent to this study are the effects that racism have on health (Paradies 2008, Beyond Blue 2016) and in education (Beresford & Gray 2012, Gray 2006, Brown 2013, Bishop, 2003).

The extent to which First Australian students in Australian boarding schools experience racism is not described in research literature, although it is widely reported that racism is a factor in education more generally (Craven & Tucker 2003, Buckskin 2013, Berman 2010, Mander 2012, Gollan 2012). Student participants in Brown’s unpublished Master’s thesis (Brown 2013) reported that racism was a relentless and persistent aspect of their daily experience of school. Consistent with these findings almost all participants in this study also reported experiencing racism at school.

It is ironic that whereas misunderstanding and mismanagement result from homesickness being normalised in school environments, the opposite is true of cultural dissonance, racial essentialism and racism. No education practitioner would be content to normalise

\(^{14}\) The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is the peak body that deals with discrimination in Australia.
racism in principle or in practice, and yet most participants in this study reported that awareness of their distinct identity as a First Australian, and tension engendered by the dissonance between their own worldview and that normalised within the school, was a constant at boarding school. For them ethnic and racial stereotypes, internalised or externally imposed, meant that they felt ‘different’ at school. In many instances, this intersected with awareness that their background was materially disadvantaged relative to their affluent middle-class peers. For many, implicit in their descriptions of difference was an assumption of inferiority that challenged their sense of self, and was a burden that in many cases became more onerous over time.

Where schools failed to appreciate the normalcy of racism and racial stereotypes, and where they were unwilling to critically evaluate the assumptions inherent in school culture, participants identified these as potent barriers to engagement or success.

This chapter begins by defining what is meant by racism and the notion of ‘culture’ before going on to present findings on how participants described encountering racism at three different levels: interpersonal, internalised, and institutional.

**Describing and defining racism**

Racism and racialised thinking are natural bedfellows. In writing about resistant responses to racist stereotypes in American universities Harper (2012, 2015) deliberately interchanges the term ‘racist’ with ‘racial’ to draw attention to how scholars write about race without explicitly naming racism and racist institutional norms, cultures, policies, and practices. His approach is helpful insofar as it focuses attention on systems level prejudice rather than limiting attention to personally mediated or vindictive manifestations of racial or ethnic discrimination. This is not to suggest that the consequences of racism are diminished because they manifest in the culture and practice of institutions, or that interpersonal racism is never an issue for First Australian boarders in predominantly non Indigenous schools. On the contrary it points to the need for critical reflection on the notion of the ‘colourblind’ school whose institutional culture is assumed to unify the school population and speak for all students. Further to the discussion of race, ethnicity and indigeneity in Chapter 1, for the purposes of this discussion, ‘racism’ is taken to include prejudice associated with indigeneity in any of its manifestations.
Paradies (2007) identifies racism as a form of oppression, which along with its opposite, privilege is based on a range of social characteristics. He claims that ‘the intertwined concept of privilege/oppression can be defined as ‘a social system in which people are divided along socially constructed dimensions with power unevenly distributed (or produced) based on these dimensions’ (p67). Participants in this study reported that they experienced racism or cultural dissonance in a variety of ways, from direct interpersonal racism, to much more subtle ‘microaggressions’ (Solorzano 1998) whose cumulative effects are described in literature as damaging to psychological, academic and physiological wellness (Harper 2015, Priest 2013).

As well as ‘external’ racism and racial dissonance, many participants’ stories or reflections also revealed an unwitting acceptance of assumptions of deficit. Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorringe & Fogarty (2013) argue that deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginality in Australia is intricately entwined within and across different sites of representation, policy and expression (p166). Similarly, the work of Sarra (2011) and the Stronger Smarter Institute speak to the impact of internalised deficit on education outcomes. Participants in this study reported that this insidious form of racism constrained their classroom participation, shaped their post-school pathways and in some cases adversely impacted their mental health.

For the purposes of this discussion, racism, racial stereotyping and cultural dissonance will be considered at three levels: inter-personal; institutional; and internalised (Jones 2000, Paradies 2007, Paradies, Harris & Anderson 2008) Participants in this study described having experienced racism in each of these incarnations at boarding school.
Section 1: Inter-personal racism

Inter-personal racism includes prejudice and discrimination, and the assumption or perpetuation of unequal power differentials. Examples include presumptions made about a person’s skills or abilities based purely on their ethnicity. Inter-personal racism can be intentional or unintentional and includes acts of commission and omission (Jones 2000). It can be perpetrated by members of any racial group, and can happen within the group (intra-racial racism) or between groups (inter-racial racism) (Paradies 2007, p69).

Many participants reported that they experienced inter-personal racism and discrimination both at school and when they returned home.

- In-school inter-personal racism

Participants described encountering inter-personal racism at school, but many were quick to qualify this by insisting that racist or racialised comments or behaviours typically reflected ignorance rather than malice. One young woman reflected that:

There’s a fine line between ignorance and racism, and... I always think to myself – maybe they just don’t know... maybe they just don’t know anything about my culture, and perhaps they’re scared of it or they’re intimidated by it. And so it would be really nice to be able to share it with people so that they get a little bit of an understanding of where I come from and who I am.

[A6, very remote]

Often racism came in the form of jokes, jibes or insensitive comments which ‘to the right person or the wrong person could come across in different ways’ [A33, regional]. Many participants spoke of how their reaction to racial comments had the potential to escalate or deescalate a situation. They acknowledged that even when comments were deflected, they had the effect of undermining their perception of belonging and cultural safety within the school:
I wouldn’t call it racism ... it’s like they make jokes or they know we’re the type of people… like I was too friendly, that I wouldn’t react, but it’s just … to have a laugh… but I wouldn’t call it racism, but it makes you wonder when you’re not around what they say.

Participants reflected on the hurt they sustained, even when comments were made in ignorance rather than with malicious intent. One example of this is the account given by a young woman [A7] of an incident in her English class:

A7  Our English teacher got us to watch Rabbit Proof Fence, and after the scene where the kids got taken away, he paused and then turned around and asked us girls how do we feel? And she kind of made a comment about, well the government weren’t really strict enough. They should have taken more kids away and breded them out of their black parentage.

R  And what did the teacher do?

A7  He was just shocked.

R  And the other girls in the class?

A7  Well they turned around to the girl and said, how can you say that? And that’s when I was just going, how would you feel if a stranger came to your perfect little mansion and stole you from what you know? You’d be quite devastated and would have lost your identity, and never seeing your parents for your entire life. And she came and saw me later on and said, look sorry, I didn’t know what I was saying, kind of thing. I was like – whatever.
She reported feeling a great deal of distress, and that she was ‘already going off’, before her teacher or classmates could respond. Even though both her peers and the teacher joined her in reacting strongly against these comments, this participant was skeptical about what the girl in question might have taken away from the incident. Her response to the apology she later received, ‘like whatever’, called into question the sincerity of the girl’s remorse, or her capacity to understand the magnitude of her own ignorance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R</th>
<th>Do you think she learned something?</th>
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<td>A7</td>
<td>I think she would have learned ... something, but still wouldn’t of really got it into her head that this was a very sensitive subject … Knowing her through the three years, she’d always go on and on about her Egyptian heritage … and being very wealthy, having a wealthy background in Egypt and stuff like that.</td>
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[A7, very remote]

It was clear that even years after the event, the memory of what had happened evoked painful emotions. For this young woman, experiencing interpersonal racism led to her feeling perpetually isolated at school. When asked whether the school generally acknowledged her cultural background, she replied:

There would be some teachers who would try and make an effort, and there would be some times where I was happy to … tell them my background, but then there would be other times where I felt pressured and didn’t really want to do it because it made me … more not liked by my year level with the particular girls who didn’t really give a rat’s arse about where I came from.

[A7, very remote]

The problem of bullying is an issue in any school and participants identified inter-personal racism as one expression of it. One made the point that ‘a lot of bullying goes on in boarding school because you’re 24/7 and you have to be tough enough to withstand that’ [A35, remote]. Like other forms of bullying, inter-personal racism, can have a long-term impact on mental health (Forero 1999). One of the older participants reflected:
[If you are not tough] you get destroyed. And I know blokes that I went to boarding school with that were ruined by boarding school and they’re bitter and twisted and alcoholics and druggies, and the boarding school turned them into that, primarily I think because they were bullied.

Amongst those who were the victims of racial ‘sledging’ or other racialised bullying, participants reported a variety of essentially ‘fight or flight’ responses. The mother and grandmother of one young man reported that ‘he was wanting to come home every five minutes’ insisting ‘I’m not getting called names, I’m coming home’ [P21 and 22, regional]. One young man who insisted that he ‘never, not once’ experienced racism at school conceded that other First Australian students at the school would not have said the same. When he was reminded of the boy who ‘had taken a swing’ at another student in response to racist comments, he responded:

He would say a bit of shit to the boys too, and I reckon they wouldn’t have just come out and said it straight out. He would have had to have stir the pot...

This raises the interesting question of whether race is seen as the first or the most natural ‘go to’ point for students in moments of otherwise standard teenage inter-personal conflict.

The tendency for non-Indigenous students to measure Aboriginality according to skin colour, combined with the perception that First Australian students enjoyed a ‘free ride’ in expensive schools was a source of resentment and bullying that many participants reported:

[I was] constantly [being] asked what percentage Aboriginal I was, or how much Aboriginal I was, and so that as if because I don’t look what the media is portraying of an Aboriginal person that I’m not actually an Aboriginal person, and I’m just claiming to be Aboriginal because of these amazing benefits supposedly Aboriginal people get.
It was common for racism to take the form of students having to justify their indigeneity and the perceived benefits that came with identifying as Aboriginal. Being a scholarship student in a high fee-paying school meant that for many young people they felt they needed be grateful, or justify their position in the school. One young man reported that at his school ‘if you weren’t exceptional at anything [or] if you weren’t obviously dark, then people would like say that – oh he’s a waste of a scholarship’ [A33, regional]. This young man’s reflection that ‘It took me probably until Year 10 football season to start talking because I didn’t really know anyone for a year almost’ points to the damage wrought by this type of discrimination. He was a talented student who later transitioned to university, but almost a year of wholehearted participation in class was forestalled by his wariness of attracting unwanted attention until he had proven himself on the football field.

As suggested here, for male participants, the experience of playing team sport afforded them the opportunity to establish relationships of respect with classmates. In this case, living up to racial stereotypes was enabling. This was a clear point of difference between the genders, although some girls also reported deriving social benefits from playing sport. One young man from a school with a large Indigenous program reflected that for him and for many of his peers, talent on the football field led to respect and acceptance more generally around the school and that this positively impacted his academic engagement.

Other participants described feeling ill-equipped to deal with racial abuse, and this highlighted their marginal position in the school. Asked if she had experienced any racism when she was at school one young woman replied:

| A27 | Not too much but just a little |
| R   | How did the racism happen?   |
| A27 | Like swearing or abusing... but I learnt how to ignore it all |
| R   | How did you ignore it?       |
| A27 | Just walk away.              |
| R   | How did it make you feel?    |
Upset, like I wanted to punch the person, but then I thought to myself I’d be expelled from the school. [A27, very remote]

Whereas participants working in schools with a large or exclusively Aboriginal student body spoke about the importance they placed on alternative dispute resolution, those who had attended predominantly non Indigenous schools reported having to find their own recourse against racial slurs and stereotypes. Some responded by using their fists, whereas others instinctively took it upon themselves to educate their classmates and the wider community.

They’d never really met Aboriginal people before, and because I was one of the very few indigenous students at [the school], their perceptions were what they saw in [the city], you know the drunks, the violence... [It was] lack of knowledge ... well I guess lack of knowledge does turn into racism, but I think I’m pretty strong in that I could handle that...through educating them. I became good friends with them. A lot of them came [home] and they saw it wasn’t like that …. I just think education is the answer to everything [laugh]....I educated a lot of their parents as well … about my upbringing, where I come from, and changing those stereotypes [A12, remote]

Testimonies like this speak to the inedible mark that First Australian students make on the school communities they join, but raises the question of who bears responsibility for challenging racial and ethnic stereotypes in schools.

That the experience of encountering direct inter-personal racism has a lasting effect on young people was evidenced by the number of participants who recalled in minute detail events that had transpired even years earlier.

- Intra-group conflict at school

Some interviewees also reported intra-group racial bullying. One young woman described boarding school as ‘shark infested waters’, a ‘toxic environment’ where the loneliness of being away from home was compounded by the ‘hierarchy of your skin colour within ...
the Aboriginal group’ [A13, very remote]. Too pale for the other First Australian students, and ‘too ethnic’ for the non Indigenous girls, this student reflected that her school days were:

…very much walking a very lonely road in between … ‘cause each side kind of spoke to me, but they wouldn’t … fully accept me, so it was just very lonely, and it was very like they all kind of had little comments to make about anything

[A13, very remote]

She described with alacrity the ‘racial microaggressions’ of which Solorzano (1998) writes in relation to chicano and chicana students in the US. Her testimony also reflects the greater likelihood that female participants reported of encountering direct interpersonal racism as a form of bullying. In her mind this was an outworking of the fact that ‘it’s a girls’ school, so people like to bitch’. Social exclusion was certainly more common amongst female participants:

At the school that I went to, if you weren’t in a cliquey group, you were an outcast, and I didn’t fit into any of the clique groups, so I kind of wandered around the corridors and in the gardens by myself type of thing [laugh]

[A7, very remote]

While skin colour was one measure of difference between First Australian students, the urban/remote divide was equally problematic for them. One young woman from a very remote community attended a large girls’ school where there were ‘seven or eight’ other First Australian scholars. She reported feeling very different to them because ‘they were from urban areas and they didn’t really understand what I was going through’ [A34, very remote]. She instinctively identified them in racial terms, saying ‘they were more... white’ but quickly qualified this by explaining:

They were more into … the urban society, like everybody was very … well dressed, had really good English and … grew up with really good families and everything like that, and … I just never clicked with them because … I never really had that kind of experience. [A34, very remote]
The fact that she spoke five languages did not give her kudos at school or create a point of connection with urban Aboriginal students. Her description of her cultural heritage reveals her awareness of the cost of attending a city boarding school, as well as the cultural gulf she perceived between her and the other First Australian students:

| I grew up with my culture around me, unlike most of the girls... Indigenous people down here, they don’t experience their culture as much as they used to, but coming from a remote area, culture is basically our life. It’s around us, it’s in the air, it’s everywhere. So I grew up with culture and it’s a really strong subject for me. I spent most of my time down here, so I haven’t really been home to do like ceremonies and stuff like that because most ceremonies don’t happen in the school holidays, they happen while school’s on … but it’s very strong for me. |
| [A34, very remote] |

These accounts highlight the danger of schools and policy makers treating First Australian students as an homogenous group. Students from different language and socio-cultural backgrounds clearly come to school with different needs and are variously positioned to fit in socially, culturally and academically at boarding school. This young woman’s testimony speaks to the heterogeneity of First Australian students in mainstream schools and it also highlights the differential value placed on Indigenous cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital as a form of currency, which can be converted into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications. European and Asian languages are readily recognised in these terms: in the Year 12 Victorian Certificate of Education, for example, foreign languages are ‘scaled up’ as a way of encouraging students to persevere with language study (VTAC 2017). No such provision is made to incentivise the study of First Australian languages, notwithstanding many of them are at risk of being lost (Disbary 2015).

- Institutional responses to inter-personal racism

How schools responded to incidents of racism was critically important in mitigating the
harm done. One mother recounted an incident in which her son’s Year 11 class was given a mnemonic to help students memorise a scientific formula: ‘Black Bastards Rape Willing White Women’. Her son lodged a complaint and the teacher lost his job. The mother recalled:

That seemed to change him because he was able to speak about it, and the principal at the time was very sympathetic... It just seemed to turn the tables and he just took such an interest in [Son]…. I reckon that was a bit of the turnaround there. He felt that people really cared about him.

[P6, regional]

It was the process implemented by the school, and the fact that his complaint was decisively acted upon, that resulted in a positive outcome for the young man in question.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Critical Race Theory is premised on the normalcy of racism, and one interviewee highlighted the value of schools pre-empting racist incidents by having formal and well-publicised policy responses in place to ensure that First Australian students understood their rights and felt empowered to enact them. Asked how her school dealt with the issue of racism, the director of one program responded:

We first of all developed the students so we did it back to front. We told students that there’s ... a zero tolerance policy to racism, and that came from the headmaster…. We would sit with all of [the Indigenous students] in the first week of their school arrival … if at any point a student says anything to you that’s racist or a teacher says anything to you that’s racist, you have permission to walk out of that classroom … So we’d set it up in the school policy that they had permission to walk away. So what that did was empower them to take action and no longer tolerate it.

[T5]

The school’s commitment to this policy extended to the expulsion of several students, and to a restorative justice process being enacted when genuine misunderstandings were perceived to be racist. In such cases students received a formal apology. The participant
here claimed that this left the students feeling ‘empowered’ [T5], but also ensured that the school community was supported to develop greater cultural awareness.

By contrast, in its *Compendium* (2015) AIEF does not refer to ‘racism’ but describes ‘Indigenous education programs’ as encountering ‘misconceptions and intolerance’ or ‘isolated incidents of prejudice’ (p114) as occurring within schools. This publication repeatedly casts schools as the subject of the sentence. Added to the fact that no Indigenous students or parents contributed to the project, the repeated use of this grammatical construction has the effect of construing Indigenous students as passive objects to be governed reminiscent of Said (1977). This sends a concerning subliminal message that reinforces rather than challenges colonial assumptions and asymmetries of power. To give one example: ‘Where appropriate support structures are in place, schools can have great success with Indigenous students from remote communities’ (p46). This is in contrast to the testimony of the participant [T5] above, where school leaders anticipated racism and worked proactively to ensure that the school would be culturally safe for its First Australian students. Rather than rely on Indigenous students to ‘break down stereotypes and prejudice’ (p115), this school recognised that the responsibility lay with school leaders to act ‘at a policy level to make sure [the school] was really culturally safe’ [T5].

- Reverse racism and encountering lateral violence at home

Many participants reported racism was not confined to the schoolyard or the boarding house. Encountering reverse racism at home was described as causing deep trauma to some participants, for whom lateral violence made them question everything they had worked for while they were away at school. Many participants from remote and very remote communities with continuing language and cultural traditions, reported that fluency in English was one of the flashpoints between them and family members who had not gone away to school. One father reflected that becoming fluent in English was one benefit of immersion in a ‘mainstream’ boarding school, but added:

> Confidence in speaking English may get taken up by [people at home] as an indicator that they’re smarter than all their peers, and developed some superior views – I’ve seen that quite often, and they actually become derailed in terms of
participating in the community, and sometimes not because they’ve necessarily caused it, but because they’ve been seen to be showing off or being ‘smart’ is the word that gets used.

[P15, very remote]

The word ‘derailed’ is an evocative one. If post-school participation in the community is thwarted or constrained by lateral violence, this can only deprecate the public good that is derived by sending young ones away to school. One woman described this phenomenon from her own experience:

…my cousin took over – … oh what you talkin’ all white for? What you tryin’ to be like? … Why are you turning into a coconut? What are they doing to you? … At the same time they were happy that I was getting an education and getting myself out of there, but they weren’t happy that I had to be a completely different person to do it.

[A13, remote]

Her strong political statement that she ‘had to be a completely different person’ to succeed at school, again reflects Battiste’s (2013) description of assimilation and speaks to the high personal cost of education for First Australian students in western, mono-cultural schools. The dilemma that this young woman identified is one that many others also reported. Nor was she alone in being told not to speak language at school. Other participants remember being told ‘English please’ when they were conversing with peers [A1, very remote]. While they reported feeling proud and gratified by their persistence in the mainstream school setting, the loss of language and the experience of being ostracised at home occasioned a deep sadness for many interviewees. They understood that unhelpful reactions from those who had not been afforded the same education opportunities covered a complex set of dynamics, but encountering lateral violence when they returned home nevertheless made it hard to return, and this increased their sense of being lost in orbit between two worlds.
Section 2: Internalised racism and deficit thinking:

Of all forms of racism, an internalised narrative of deficit is the most insidious. Internalised racism is the acceptance of attitudes, beliefs or ideologies by members of stigmatised groups about the inferiority of their own ethnic/racial group (Gorringe, Ross & Fforde 2011). Examples of this include First Australian students believing that everyone else is smarter than them, or feeling helpless and hopeless at school (Jones 2000, Paradies et al. 2008). While some participants reported that their school actively challenged deficit stereotypes, more often these went unrecognised or were reinforced by school programs.

Literature establishes that deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginality is ‘intricately entwined within and across different sites of representation, policy and expression, and is active within non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australia’ (Fforde et al. 2013, p163). Sarra (2011) cautions against internalising ‘highly negative perceptions of what being Aboriginal is’ (p78), and argues that Aboriginal people must decide their identity according to their own ‘terms of reference’:

‘The consequences of not doing this are dire. If we fail to engage this issue now, then we run the very real risk of losing our sense and understanding of Aboriginal identity: to the extent that we are either indistinguishable from white Australians, or caged by the very negative identity they have developed for us’ (p79).

Consistent with literature that identifies ‘covert, nuanced, subtle and insidious’ (Fforde et al. 2013, p166) assumptions of deficit within the discursive space around Aboriginality, most participants here reported assuming they were ‘coming from behind’ during their time at boarding school. Many reported that they would actively avoid contributing to class for fear of being judged. This is also consistent with international literature finding that lowering self-expectations for academic achievement is one way in which students react to stereotypes (Aronson 2002, Harper 2015). This has potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: feelings of academic inferiority can and often do lead to academic withdrawal and the self-suppression of contributions to class discussions (Harper 2015).

A number of participants reflected that their own assumptions of ‘coming from behind’
were reinforced by the patent or latent attitudes of the school. One young man described meeting his school principal for the first time:

I went to his office and he started asking me about maybe a favourite book that I’d liked, and I didn’t really have a favourite book because I didn’t like reading, I wasn’t very good at reading. And so he said a good book to read would be ... what was it... it was Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

[A32, regional]

The irony of this recommendation seemed to have been lost on the young man, and I was left wondering whether he had read the book, and if so to what extent he identified with the hapless Charlie Bucket, chief protagonist in Roald Dahl’s novel. In being selected for a scholarship place at a prestigious school, was he to believe he had won a Golden Ticket? Like Charlie, he had been plucked at random from a life of poverty and disadvantage, but in his case Grandpa Joe had to stay at home. Like Charlie, this first meeting marked the beginning of what in retrospect felt like a long wild ride over which he had had no control, but always with the elusive promise of a better life ahead. Like Charlie, this young man reported feeling constantly unsure of himself. Asked how he felt going into the classroom he replied:

Intimidated. I didn’t ... and this [is] still something I do today, I feel as if I’m being judged all the time, and like I said, to today, I still feel as if whoever I meet or whoever I come in contact with, they’re judging me just because of who I am, being Indigenous. I know it’s not necessarily true, but that’s just how I feel, and so when I first went into a classroom ... it was kind of confronting because all these people that had known each other and I didn’t have anyone else there with me, I was by myself.

[A32, regional]

This young man started at boarding school at the start of Year 7, when most students were also new to the school, but he perceived that he was ‘by himself’. Over time he reported becoming more comfortable at school, but his lack of self-belief remained a constant and he reflected on the inner turmoil it occasioned:
I had expectations from school … as years went on, and I did become this leader, and I understood that … I started getting more confident and I could speak out and … my vocabulary got a lot better, and I learnt how to … present myself in a manner that was right in other people’s eyes …

His observation that there was a ‘right’ ways of presenting himself ‘in other people’s eyes’ speaks to a larger and more confronting iteration of internalised deficit. He spent increasing amounts of time with a school family and in that context, he began to perceive that his ‘deficiencies’ were not limited to academic standards, but included his whole way of being. This set up a crisis of identity that had not been resolved at the time he was interviewed.

It felt wrong because I knew … it always goes back to family. It’s just … I’m getting treated like this but what about my brothers and sisters, they’ve got nothing but I’ve got all of this. I’ve got these people looking after me. So I mean … it was really good, but there were some times where within that family I was doing things that … I don't know, just being from where I come from, being from an Aboriginal culture where you know you live one certain way and then come into a non Indigenous family where they expect you to live another way, it did feel foreign, it didn’t feel right. I mean everything they expected from me was right, and I know that now, but back then it just didn’t feel right.

His own crisis was exacerbated by the rejection he felt from his mother and grandmother. Adapting to different norms meant that he was cast as an outsider at home:

It wasn’t normal, and it wasn’t seen acceptable by my mum or by my family because to them it was like I was trying to be someone I’m not … I wasn’t trying to be Aboriginal, I was trying to be non Aboriginal you know.

Although he remained in school until part-way through Year 12, he observed:
To be honest, I should have left in Year 8, probably Year 7, I should have left school... because there was just so much going on in my head, and I started doubting myself and putting expectations on myself, and when I’d do something wrong, I’d really beat myself up about it. I mean I wanted to be this perfect person for other people.

[A32, regional]

This young man, and a number of other participants, described a crippling disconnect between their public persona and their private sense of self. Schools called on them to make presentations in assemblies and to speak at fundraising events, but inside, they felt chronically unworthy. One confided:

That’s what scares me most … people who invest in the past and how you turn out in the future … the first thing [mentor] said to me when I got accepted, he was like – mate you need to go because I had to do a lot of lying, like I talked you up so much, you have to go there and have a crack.

[A1, very remote]

At the same time as they were being asked to speak publicly about ‘how we went further’ [A1, very remote], a sense that they were ‘less than’ those around them persisted. For some participants, this perception of deficit was compounded by their economic circumstances. Many spoke of school as ‘high class’ or ‘too upper class for me’ [A1, very remote] and this had implications for their integration into school and for their sense of self. One young woman reflected on how this impacted her ability to ask for help

I was too shy to ask anyone [for help] because I felt like they would have judged me and thought I was stupid, because most of the other girls at schools like that are really fancy, and most of them were rich and smart girls … and I just didn’t want anyone to judge me and make me feel like I wasn’t meant to be there. So I didn’t really talk to the house parents.

[A34, very remote]
She went on to reflect on the consequences of deficit embedded in the government’s current ‘Close the Gap’ policy discourse. After we finished the interview and were packing up, she sighed ‘I wish people would stop talking about ‘the gap’: the gap, the gap, I live in the gap’ [A34, field notes]. It seemed that her already multi-faceted sense of deficit coalesced with formal government policy to entrench a lack of self-belief and self-efficacy. A few participants reported being pleasantly surprised when they realised that they could keep up with their peers, because, in the words of one young man, ‘I thought there’d be a big gap’ [A19, remote].

Inter-personal racism and internalised deficit were respectively described by participants as powerful in constraining engagement at school and academic attainment. Perhaps even more disempowering was the experience of encountering racism embedded in institutional norms and cultures. Where participants met with institutional racism, asymmetries of power were exposed that they described as eroding their sense of belonging and purpose within the mainstream system.

**Section 3: Institutional racism and the role of school culture**

Institutional racism is closely associated with representation and the denial of social justice entitlements. The scholarship programs that supported key participants in this study to attend boarding school are premised on the rhetoric of social justice. It is ironic then, that little attention is paid to what conditions need to be satisfied within schools if they are to support socially just outcomes for their First Australian students. Whereas Jones (2000) defines institutional racism as ‘differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race’ (p1212), other researchers argue that social justice includes issues of autonomy, power and respect (Cuervo 2012). Durie (2005) claims that social justice cannot be achieved unless policies reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of society. He cautions that where social diversity is masked (for example by a singular narrative around school culture and identity), best outcomes will be compromised, and assimilation will be fostered.

Making scholarship places available for First Australian students in high performing, high fee-paying schools is not all that is required to bring about socially just outcomes.
Recognising difference, and the whole cultural and material circumstance of a person’s life, must be integral to redistributive programs if real justice is to be achieved (Fraser 2007, Nussbaum 2011, Young 1990). To this end, redistributive measures should be accompanied by institutional changes that enable oppressed people ‘to participate as peers in social life’ (Fraser 2007, p27, Lorsch, 2016).

Young argues that any assimilationist ideal aiming to bring formerly excluded groups into ‘the mainstream’ always implies ‘coming into the game after it is already begun, after the rules and standards have already been set, and having to prove oneself against those rules and standards’ (p164). Institutional racism is therefore normative, and includes access to power (Young 1990, Yosso 2005). In school settings, institutional racism is often built into curriculum and the assumptions that underlie school traditions and culture (Yunkaporta 2009, Nakata 2002, Sarra 2011). It is also reflected in the extent to which First Australian voices contribute to the life of the school, particularly at staff and management levels. Where parental voices are repeatedly silenced, families may be right to assume that they are experiencing institutional racism.

A number of participants, particularly amongst those who had gone on to tertiary study, named institutional racism as a factor constraining their engagement and academic attainment during their secondary years. Younger participants did not identify institutional racism as such, but they described powerfully their experiences of being marginalised or essentialised at school. This group was more likely to see problems as reflecting their own inadequacy, rather than as a manifestation of institutional racism within the school culture.

Understanding school culture

In understanding how institutional racism worked against participants in this study, it is necessary to engage with the notion of culture. On an individual basis and following social identity tradition, the importance of culture is highlighted as it explains how individuals begin to think about themselves, their relationships with others, their goals and their desires (Williams 1958). As Williams (1958) claimed in an early text in cultural studies, ‘culture is ordinary, in every society, and in every mind’. His dual focus on the
personal and the social echoes in Bourdieu’s insistence on the dynamic interaction between the personally inscribed habitus, and the culturally inscribed social field. Similarly, anthropologist Clifford Geertz contends (1973) ‘we are, in sum incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture’ (p12). Geertz understood ‘culture’ as those historically transmitted patterns of explicit and implicit messages, language and meaning embodied in the symbols of the environment. Within a school context, Bolman & Deal (1990) describe ‘culture’ as the ‘deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of [the school’s] history’ and as a way to infuse a school with passion, meaning and purpose. These are often foreign to the outsider, but can be observed during the social interactions and behaviours of the participants of the group. The schools represented in this study are deeply inscribed with the discourses and dynamics of Australian colonial history described in Chapter 1.

The accounts of participants in this study problematise the notion of school culture, and expose a nexus between school culture, institutional racism and the social and academic outcomes they achieved. Narratives make power differentials visible. In some instances, they also highlight the role of leaders in shaping or reshaping school cultures to avoid, overcome or perpetuate issues of representation. This is equally true in schools where participants claim that the institutional culture acted to silence First Australian voices, as it is in schools where active efforts were made to redress power differentials.

This section will begin by discussing institutional racism as an expression of racial stereotyping and essentialism. It will go on to consider the wider school environment, including the issue of Indigenous representation through curriculum and in schools’ embodied culture. It will finish with a detailed case study exploring how issues of representation came to challenge one young man’s sense of belonging at school.

Institutional racism, representation, stereotypes and essentialism

A number of participants identified institutional racism in the form of differential treatment they had received either at school or in the boarding house. One young woman expressed frustration that ‘rather than seeing us as Year 8 girls like the rest of the year group ... it was like we’re Indigenous.’ [A20, urban]. Despite this she reported that neither teachers nor boarding staff had received any training on providing culturally appropriate
care to First Australian students and consequently they ‘just missed that whole cultural dynamic’. These participants reported that staff did not seek guidance from students themselves, or from adult family members.

Feeling that they were stereotyped frustrated many participants. One example of this was the parallel experience of three female participants: each recounted that when there was an outbreak of lice in their boarding house they were presumed to be the culprit, even though they showed no sign of infestation. The humiliation of being singled out was still raw with one of the three:

They’d take us out when all the kids could see, and make sure we were getting our hair treatments - where … non Indigenous kids would be put through on the sly so they didn’t have to feel embarrassed about it in front of their friends … we were the ones who had to be taken out at like 3 in the afternoon and ‘do this for your hair’, and then all the [others] would be given theirs at like 8 p.m. when we’re all supposed to be in bed. So that was really frustrating. It’s frustrating now, I didn’t really think of it back then because it was something that just happened, and you’d have to roll with it, but it’s frustrating now.

[A13, very remote]

In the same vein, a number of young people reported that when there was a theft, they were assumed to be liable:

When things would go missing she felt like people were kind of snickering behind her back and saying that she must of taken it you know, or one of the [Aboriginal] kids must have taken it because they’re the poorer kids that are all on scholarship there and whatnot, so they would have to steal to have anything good.

[P20, regional]

It was common for young people to report feeling humiliated by the stereotypes that attached to them, some to the point where they wanted to leave school. Racial essentialism also extended to the classroom and had implications for their academic performance.
**Racial stereotypes and a culture of low expectation**

In a speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 2000, President George W. Bush famously decried the ‘soft bigotry of low expectations’ many students of colour encounter in American schools. Similarly, Noel Pearson’s ‘radical hope’ in sending secondary aged students to ‘high-quality, high-expectation boarding schools down south’ (Pearson 2011a) is premised on the assumption that those schools will maximise educational achievement for First Australian students. Pearson argues that educating children ‘at the highest level of effort, ambition and excellence that we can muster’ will equip them for ‘a life worth valuing’ (p140). Despite this, there are currently no studies exploring the extent to which high expectation schools bring equivalent expectations to the First Australian students in their care. Data here suggest that that is often not the case.

Many participants reported that teachers’ expectations of them were not the same as for other students. Several reported that schools underestimated their potential and assigned them to the lowest streamed classes, even when their results from previous years indicated that they were very able students. One young man, currently studying medicine, reflected that:

> In classes, I often got spoken to differently by teachers ... they spoke to the other students like they were older and more mature, and they spoke to me like I was a kid often ..., yeah that happened a lot - like really I was simple, and it made me feel I was a kid in the class.

Another believed that teacher expectations were equivalent for all students, but his account suggests that a lower academic pathway at his school was normative for First Australian students:

> The teachers have always been really great. They didn’t really discriminate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous. They were really encouraging ... the teachers there are really encouraging, but with the Indigenous boys, what happened was that most of the time we were really good at sport, so the football
and the basketball team and the athletics team, the Indigenous boys were at the forefront. So it was sort of like we weren’t really the leading guys in the classroom, but when it came to the track we were up there.

Although prowess at sport may help young men to socially integrate more effectively, Harper (2015) identifies the racial stereotype of young black men being talented athletes as contributing to a culture of low academic expectations.

Another outworking of this issue is the degree to which special treatment or extra academic support is provided to First Australian students. The timing and degree of help that participants received was variously described as enabling or constraining. One participant reflected on how little boarding school prepared him to transition to the autonomy of university life because ‘everything was hand given’ at his school. He described how this had bred in him a learned dependence and general lack of volition, which meant that ‘as soon as I found out that if I didn’t have to go, like no-one would tell me to go or wake me up, I didn’t go’ [A1, very remote]. In a similar vein, another young man reflected:

I do believe the teachers did pity me a lot … I’d get away with a lot of things the non-Indigenous wouldn’t … Actually I do believe it was just because I was black. And if I didn’t get my homework in they’d be fine. If another kid didn’t get his in he’d get detention. And it was so obvious. Kids would point it out to me. … … Knowing that some teachers pitied me, I’d just take advantage of that, and that didn’t help me, but then they weren’t helping me. They just let me. And I’m not just saying that, that’s honest. I did feel as if some teachers just let me off because I looked black.

From his interview, it became apparent that this participant’s life was complicated and that his mental health was fragile. He reported serious suicidal ideation from Year 8 onwards. At the time of being interviewed he had made several attempts on his life. Whether teachers had adjusted expectations in response to apparent vulnerability is
unclear. His perception was that they were unaware of his suffering, but this has not been tested. A limitation of the current study is that schools have contributed only to a limited extent. Even so, participants’ narratives reveal a complex web of interrelated factors that might have informed teachers’ expectations. While a culture of low expectation may exist within a school, it is equally true that in some cases it may have been irresponsible not to adjust expectations in recognition of a young person’s wider life circumstances. What is concerning is if low expectations reflect racist stereotypes of academic potential rather than as a response to students’ actual needs.

Where help was presumed to be required by dint of their ethnic identity, participants reacted strongly against it. One young woman, now qualified as a doctor, recalled how she was placed in an ESL (English as a Second Language) class:

> So I would be pulled out of English classes to go into ESL classes, and felt really embarrassed by that, and I would get very angry about having to go, and they were like – look, we know you don’t speak English as a second language, but this is like one-on-one tutoring for you, so it’ actually really good. You know you should just embrace this, and you should just do it, and I went, yeah anyway.. and I’d often go home crying, and I hated it so much, and I really had to find a way to get out of that school. [A21, urban]

Her response, ‘yeah anyway’ and tears at home, raises the question of how, for some students, receiving extra academic support might feed into internalised assumptions of deficit. Clearly the anger and frustration she felt at being characterised as a struggling student, purely on the basis of her indigeneity, had made a lasting impression on this young woman. Although others described experiences like this as contributing to a diminution of academic self-concept, and a desire to escape the school environment as soon as possible, for her it generated a determination to prove herself equal to her classmates. She remembered choosing the hardest course of study available at her school:

> I guess I’ve always had this mentality kind of to prove people wrong … I wanted to do really well in school, because there’s always been low expectations of me in school… I just wanted to be the top student [laugh] to sort of prove everyone wrong, because basically, all the bullying I had in school was … around people
just as soon as they found out my identity, would say oh your family must be petrol sniffers, or you must ... or you know they made it very obvious that they knew that my family didn’t have much money, yeah. [A21, urban]

At the time of being interviewed she had recently graduated from a degree in Medicine, and the account she gave of navigating both the school and university systems bore compelling witness to her resilience.

A constructivist approach that makes space to begin with the learner’s own life experience, and builds on his or her strengths should be an essential part of engaging young Indigenous people as it is for any others (Hattie 2009, McKew 2014). This enables students to work from the known to the unknown, and sets them up for educational success (Fogarty 2012, Harris 1990, Langton & Ma Rhea 2009, Nakata 2007, Osborne 2014, 2013, Schwab 2012, Wearne & Yunupingu 2011, Yunkaporta 2009).

Institutional racism and asymmetries of power

Most participants in this study felt that their school placed real value on having an Indigenous program, but a number reported that they had very little power or influence to help shape it. When participants were asked what they would like to say to schools, their answers essentially came back to voice. This included ensuring Indigenous representation on staff; creating a critical mass of First Australian students in schools; supporting students’ cultural identity at school; working more closely with families and communities; confronting stereotypes and building a culturally inclusive knowledge base through the curriculum. The question of who has an effective voice in schools was an issue that was of primary importance to many. Where school culture precluded Indigenous students and their families from being involved in decision-making and problem solving, a number of participants questioned the philosophy underpinning scholarship programs:

I smirk when you get Aboriginal advocates saying it’s the solution. It’s not the bloody solution, not for everybody, and you know millions of dollars are going into sending kids to boarding school and I think it’s largely still assimilation like the days when I was there … I think there’s a lot of window dressing goes on, but it’s essentially about assimilating Aboriginal kids... still. [A35, remote]
The presumption that schools knew what was best for students without consulting parents was a particular concern for many participants and one that revealed pronounced power differentials between home and school. My experience of working in the sector has taught me that high fee-paying parents are a formidable force in independent schools, and vociferous advocates for the needs and rights of their own children. By contrast, First Australian families interviewed in this study reported feeling disempowered in speaking up for their young ones. Once again, their cultural and social capital had little if any currency in the school system (Bourdieu 1986).

One mother described evocatively her experience of this power differential as she tried to advocate for her daughter:

They can be patronising of your Aboriginality ... the teaching profession is a lot of power, and if you don’t like what they have and you don’t fit into their framework, you’re on the out you know. It’s like you don’t fit into that little box – out you go!! We only want little jack in the boxes here and when we lift the lid that’s the only time they come out and do things.  

[P12, very remote].

Her experience of being ‘shut down’ by educators who insisted they knew better than she what her daughter needed was doubly galling as she had ably negotiated the education system in her own adult life: she was the recipient of a prestigious merit based national scholarship and holds a Master’s degree in public health. Her testimony, which is presented at length in Case Study 2, is consistent with a trend identified by critical researchers whereby marginalised groups are not accorded a voice in ‘mainstream’ education settings (Keddie 2012, Young 1990, Fraser 2008, Yosso 2005). This falls squarely within the definition of institutional racism, and should give education providers, policy makers and philanthropists pause to consider power imbalances inherent in schools and systems.

Others described treatment they felt was unfair and how powerless they felt to challenge people in positions of power because of their financial position. One young woman recounted being the only student expelled from her boarding house when she and others had been involved in a particular breach of boarding house rules. She reported that her
mother agreed to her becoming a day student out of concern that if she made a fuss, her
daughter would lose her scholarship position in the school altogether. The power
differential that she identified was an issue for many participants, and manifest in
different and occasionally subtle ways. An example of this was the grandmother who
recounted how her Year 11 grandson was allotted a room alongside junior students rather
than in the senior accommodation block because:

Matron [said] that there were two or three ratbags in the Year 11 block, and she
said sometimes he’s very easily led, so we thought if we kept him here on the
same floor, that might … not let him be led astray because he has a lot of potential.

She did not feel that she was in a position to challenge the decision, although she
understood why her grandson was upset. She wondered why ‘the ratbags’ should not
have been dealt with directly.

These anecdotes point to an insidious paternalism which participants found at best
irritating and at worst deeply disempowering. The grandmother here reflected on how the
young man’s room allocation had eroded his confidence:

He was looking forward to that step, oh yeah I get to go in with the other Year 11s
and 12s, and he seems to think … obviously I’m not that good, I get to stay here.

This young man became deeply unhappy at school. To exacerbate personal problems, the
relationship between his school and scholarship provider had broken down. When he
returned to his regional community for weekends he was reluctant to go back to the
boarding house and his grandmother was concerned about the company he kept at home.
His behaviours were consistent with those described by Yosso (2005) who identifies the
disadvantages of an individual accumulating human and social capital relative to his or
her peers at home. The need to reintegrate into their home community means that young
ones maybe susceptible to what she describes as ‘downward levelling norms’; in this case
those included exposure to drugs and alcohol.
This grandmother reflected how important it is for the adults in a young person’s life to work together to support them in their education. In this case, the dysfunctional relationship between school and scholarship provider had a ‘disastrous’ impact on her grandson. She mused ‘It makes the kids feel like they’re not valued, and then it’s up to family then to pick that undervaluation up and build it up again’ [P21, regional].

The lack of communication between people who were meant to be supporting this young man left him feeling inadequate and vulnerable to dropping out altogether.

Consequences of institutional racism

Interviews in this study indicate that the outworking of institutional racism has serious practical implications for Indigenous students. For a number of participants, the silencing of parental voices meant that health concerns were either overlooked or mismanaged. This is of particular concern given the prevalence of mental health problems known to afflict First Australian young people (Dugeon et al. 2016). One participant, who was acting as guardian to an Aboriginal student from a very remote community, reported that she had harboured concerns about the young woman’s mental health but neither she nor the family was kept informed of the student’s wellbeing:

| P23 | It was the person in the counselling area that rang me first and said they were seriously worried about her mental health, but they did not tell me that they had taken her to a doctor and had her put on antidepressants. And … it was after the event, after they’d actually gone there and got her put onto antidepressants that I was told about it...
| R | Had they told her family?
| P23 | No, no, and that was even more shocking. |

[P23, Guardian to student from very remote community]

In this case, there were a series of social and educational issues contributing to the student’s poor mental health, but rather than seriously engage with them, the school
pathologised her behaviour and consequently the underlying problems went unaddressed. Another mother [P12] similarly complained that her daughter had been put onto anti-depressants when she had not even been informed that there was a problem with her daughter’s mental health.

During the course of my fieldwork I had a conversation with an Indigenous liaison officer who recounted that she had arranged thousands of dollars’ worth of orthodontic work for a junior secondary student. This included extracting a number of teeth and fitting braces on the last day before the child returned home for the Christmas holidays. She recounted that the student was delighted because now she would be ‘just like everyone else’ in her year level. There is no question that both the teacher and the professional offering pro bono services had the best intentions. Indeed, their actions reveal a deep concern for the holistic wellbeing of the young person, and a willingness to go above and beyond to ensure that the child accessed services to the same level as any other student in the school. I do not for a moment suggest that this type of care is inappropriate, quite the opposite, but when I questioned how many girls in her home community wore braces, and whether her mother had been briefed on how to care for a child with a mouth full of pain and potential complications over the summer, there was a long pause. The teacher had not informed the mother about the proposed treatment, much less sought approval for it. As she talked, it dawned on her that she would never have taken that approach with a ‘mainstream’ student.

In another case a mother contacted me saying that she had heard of my research and needed to tell her story. Her daughter had taken up a scholarship position in Year 8 at an elite city school but when a crisis occurred at home she became distressed and wanted to leave the school. At this point the retrospective funding arrangement between the school and the scholarship provider worked against her:

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Well [they said] you have to [stay] because if you go back, they were threatening her... because she was just so unhappy, she was like well I want to leave, and... they said to her, if you go then your mum’s going to have to pay thousands of dollars because you signed a form that you’ll be here for a year and you’ve
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committed to a year, and you’ll have to pay us, and she said a figure of around $18,000 and it was probably more like $50,000.

Feeling that she was now trapped at the school, the girl’s behaviour became increasingly oppositional and self-destructive:

… they actually found her in the toilet drinking a UDL can, and to me that’s not like she’s sitting around with a group of friends... I don’t know what she was doing on her own with a fucking drink [laugh]... sorry.

Rather than understanding aberrant behaviour as a maladaptive reaction to issues over which the young person felt she had no control, and working with the family to address the cause, the school treated this young woman as a problem student. She was not the only participant expelled or suspended from school, others also reported being punished for behaviours that they claimed were the outworking of emotional stress that they had no other way of expressing.

In his submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Indigenous Education (2016), Executive Director of AIEF, Andrew Penfold, recommended that:

‘There should be a transition to a 100 per cent success-based retrospective funding model in this sector where the government simply pays an agreed sum when an outcome is achieved. If a government only pays when an outcome is achieved and otherwise pays nothing, it would quickly limit wastage of government funds’ (Submission 35, 2015).

This essentially mercantile language fails to engage with the complex lived experience participants in this study described, and feeds into the power differentials identified here. It also assumes that only one ‘outcome’ is acceptable to funders; falling short of achieving that, any other benefits students derive from their time at boarding school are a ‘wastage of government funds’. As illustrated above, a retrospective funding model aimed at ensuring that families have ‘skin in
the game’ may put inordinate or unsustainable pressure on young people to persevere at boarding school when health and other indicators suggest that they would be better to return home. This is particularly concerning where the institutional culture of a boarding school is such that parents and community members are precluded from advocating for their young ones.

It is interesting to note that while AIEF claims a 94% retention and Year 12 completion rate (AIEF, 2016), there is no clarity about whether this number includes students who drop out during their first year or otherwise fail to meet mandated outcomes. There are currently no data on whether, when they do drop out, they re-engage with education, although anecdotal evidence suggests that many do not. This is an area that warrants further research.

Cultural dissonance and institutional racism

The presumed superiority of one set of cultural values and how they are embodied within the school environment goes to the heart of institutional racism. For some young people, institutional racism became visible in culturally dissonant life priorities, for others it was exposed when they sought to express their cultural identity within the school.

As discussed above, a number of participants in this study reported feeling coerced into prioritising school over communal belonging and familial responsibility because school insisted that this was the pathway to a ‘better life’. These participants recalled that when the school was made aware of issues at home, they were encouraged not to return, in some cases even during school holidays. One young man claimed that his school-appointed guardian ‘didn’t want me to be a part of [my family] anymore’ [A32, regional]. Pressure exerted unilaterally by schools to be detached from issues at home is quite different to that generated when schools and families work together to encourage young ones to put education first. Families can negotiate issues of culture, responsibility and belonging, but schools are never in a position to fully understand or prioritise competing demands. The young people who reported unilateral pressure to conform to the expectations of schools spoke of how it constrained their engagement at school and impacted their ability to fit in at home after school.
Many participants perceived pressure to see their future in entirely Eurocentric terms even though these were fundamentally at odds with their family’s ethos. This was especially difficult for participants from remote and very remote communities: one young man felt that the school ‘didn’t [ever] want us to go back [to community]’ [A1, very remote]. His narrative reveals the danger of imposing empirical and achievement oriented measures of ‘success’ with no reference to the full circumstances of a young person’s life. Implicit in his account are competing cultural assumptions about what constitutes a ‘good life’ and what value education has relative to the priority of sustaining relationships with family and community. As the consequences of this became apparent, this participant, like with a number of others, reported reaching a point of particular crisis. After a stint at university he moved closer to home, began drinking ‘every day’ and once attempted suicide. He reflected:

I think I was depressed, I’m pretty sure I was. I was drinking … every day. I thought I’d failed, and the feeling of failure was there. I had to like find something else, like find a job first, and that was like hard, and that’s when I realised there was no [Indigenous liaison officer] or there was no... I had to do this on my own, and the people who used to look after me in [Capital City], they weren’t there, like my family, they weren’t really there, and that was pretty hard… Yeah, but it’s really crazy because all of a sudden I was at a weird point of my life. I was suicidal… Yeah I was really crazy, because you realise that people won’t help you as much they used to

[A1, very remote]

For several this occurred mid-way through Year 12, as the dissonance between home and school became starkly apparent and post-school pathways began to represent a choice between binaries. Unable to make their voices heard during their school years, a number of university-aged participants had made determined efforts to return to their boarding school in either paid or voluntary capacities to ensure that others would not have to endure what they had. They reported becoming increasingly activist in their efforts to have institutions critically examine the cultural assumptions underlying social justice programs. In particular, the issue of whose voices and whose cultural assumptions are seen as relevant in mainstream schools was significant:
What do you want to talk about one whole race for when you don’t have one person from that race there? … You’re not letting us have a voice; you’re not interested in what we want [you] to hear. You’re interested in looking like you’re doing something when you’re not even listening to what needs to be done by the people who have to live with what you’re trying to put in.

[A13, remote]

**Institutional racism and curriculum**

While voice and equal participation in decision making were important issues, most participants also shared concern at the lack of culturally informed and appropriate representation in the school curriculum. This is despite the ready availability of materials specifically developed to help schools foster higher levels of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions to society (see for example Nurragunnawali 2017).

Whereas Apple (2013) identifies schools as potential drivers of social change, Bourdieu sees them as efficient mechanisms for the reproduction of the status quo. He contends that the dominant hegemonic culture maintains its benefits to the detriment of ‘the other’ by continually transmitting and legitimising their beliefs and values (Bourdieu 1973). Those in positions of power are able to transmit their beliefs and perpetuate the dominant hegemonic culture due to ‘the other’s’ inability to engage due to resource scarcity or lack of opportunities (Azaola 2012). Schools do not exist in a socio-cultural vacuum, and sociologists and policy makers alike recognise that education is therefore an inherently political activity (Abbott 2014, Apple 2012, 2013, Fraser 1997, Freire 1993, Nussbaum 2010, Lareau 2011). Who benefits most from education; whose knowledge and ways of knowing are considered legitimate; and how they find their way into curricula are all questions that highlight the way power is differentially distributed in schools (Apple 1999).

The 1995 National Review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education (Department of Employment 1995) found that educational participation is not a culturally neutral activity and must take into account ‘the differing positions and histories of
communities, families and individuals’. This is still a vexed issue in the Australian context: the goal of establishing a national curriculum that appropriately recognises the First Nations histories and people of the land has generated heated and on-going public debate (Government 2014, p.17). This echoes a vitriolic dispute about the true history of this nation that has raged in the press and in the academic domain and that continues to this day (Kerin 2016, Macintyre 2003, Windschuttle 2002, Manne 2003).

When asked if they had encountered racism at school, the most common response was for participants to raise the issue of curriculum, and especially the history curriculum currently taught in schools. One father, a significant leader in his community, insisted that schools should teach ‘the proper history and not the lying history’ of Australia [P3, remote]. He argued that this was not primarily for the sake of Indigenous students, but because schools ‘need to work on their student population about getting the students...you know the other students, making them aware of the history of Aboriginal people’. For him, curriculum was an important vehicle to confront ignorance and ensure that racial stereotypes are debunked:

We’re not bad, we’re not like cowboys and Indians – Indians are portrayed as bad all the time and so were we you know. We were thieves, we stole the sheep and cattle, and that sort of stuff, and savages you know. So that’s got to go.

[P3, remote]

While this participant recognised that affirmative action programs are important in challenging past injustice or social exclusion (‘The schools first of all have opened up—that’s good for the kids...’ [P3, remote]), he recognised that justice also required ‘the proper history’ to be taught in classrooms. Other participants highlighted the need for a differentiated history curriculum that reflects the diverse and ‘vast’ history of Indigenous Australia:

I did Chinese history with him, and … Australian history with him as well, and being Indigenous I was thinking you’re teaching me Chinese history [laugh] and then you’re teaching me Australian history, why aren’t you teaching me Indigenous history? And what I took into account … is that Indigenous history is
vast. It’s not subject to one history. In [city] where this isn’t my language group, this isn’t my country … so if I was here I would have to learn the history of the people here. And I think that’s where a lot of non Indigenous people they have this breakdown … I don’t think they grasp that there’s a lot of differences in Aboriginal people, there really is [laugh]

[A25, very remote]

Understanding history in context was a matter of importance for interviewees across different generations, different language and cultural backgrounds and different geographic zones. The politics underlying curriculum choices were a point of recurring angst:

It was really frustrating in history because they’d be talking about white history – they’d talk about say the Renaissance, they’d talk about Nazi Germany, they’d talk about Australia after 1901 when Federation happened, and ... because I was the only Indigenous kid in the class, they’d be like – oh, there were black people here, but the real history starts when these white people came and all these things happened. And I’m like no. It doesn’t happen like that.

[A25, very remote]

Interviewees repeatedly complained not only about the lack of representation in school curricula, and the history curriculum in particular, but also about the selection and delivery of those issues that were covered in class. Often deficit based representations were presented and this was described as disempowering. One young woman recounted how, having been given no warning from the teacher, she was confronted with distressing statistics in the science classroom:

I remember sitting … in biology when they were talking about Indigenous health, and that Aboriginal people died a lot younger age … and ... I was so upset and really distraught because I had to link that to my family all dying at a younger age, and I didn’t know the statistics, and I didn’t know what it meant at the time, and I found it really difficult – I had to leave the classroom.
She went on to recall that ‘teachers would sort of put me on the spot and say is that right? Or do you have anything to add? And it was ... intimidating and embarrassing’ [A21, urban]. Another participant, who was about to finish a master’s degree in teaching, expressed dismay at the way her people continue to be represented in the university curriculum:

The way the curriculum is set out in the books that they teach still to this day is still so confronting for me, … the way they teach that Aborigines, it’s written in the book in case studies and the pictures are just horrific – we look like monkeys... and for me that’s really confronting. [A12, very remote]

In this instance, the experience of being singled out in class and asked to speak about the history of her people, which was inaccurately represented in prescribed texts, left her feeling that she wanted to walk away from the course altogether: ‘I don’t want to go back to that class ... it was really confronting, and I almost was just like I don’t know if this course is for me’ [A12, very remote]. Her testimony, and that of a number of other university students, indicated that issues constraining education engagement and achievement in secondary schools are often replicated in higher education institutions.

Findings presented here are consistent with literature that reports on the extent to which Indigenous students in mainstream schools often actively disengage where there is a lack of cultural relevance in curriculum, coupled with a lack of basic cultural awareness from staff (Brown 2013, Guenther 2013b, Nakata 2007, Osborne & Guenther 2013, Berryman 2011, Tuhiwai Smith 2012, Rigney 2010). The experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being misrepresented in classrooms is also described in literature: Martin Nakata (2012) describes the ‘strange sensation’ he experienced as a tertiary student of coming across ‘what is supposed to be a representation of yourself in a text’ and the ‘sick feeling’ that followed as he thought:
‘But this isn’t me’ or, ‘This isn’t how I perceive my position’ or, ‘This wasn’t my experience’. And then comes the related anxiety, of course: ‘Is this how others see me?’ ‘How do others see me?’ ‘And all Torres Strait Islanders?’ (p88)

Interview data indicate that the majority of participants in this study had experienced this phenomenon of misrepresentation during their time at school; for many, this contributed to a sense of ‘being different’ from other students. This had implications far beyond the classroom, and fed into their sense of not belonging within the school.

One participant gave a detailed account of his interactions with the school principal as he fought to have the sovereign rights of his people recognised and celebrated at school. His account is an important example of how a school’s culture, its institutional habitus, can work against First Australian students living and learning in elite education environments where their own world views are not honoured. His account is presented as Case Study 1(below). It recounts his perspective on what happened, supported by correspondence between himself and the school principal, and between himself and his local MP15.

**Case Study 1: Participant A4 [regional]**

This young man [A4] grew up in a regional town and attended an elite city boarding school from Years 10 to 12. He described being ‘a little shocked’ at the academic standard at his new school, and convinced that ‘everyone was smarter’ than him. Notwithstanding, he felt that he played an important role in the school, particularly in educating the wider school community about his culture. He described his indigeneity as foundational to his sense of self and how performing his identity was a priority in his new school environment. He explained this by saying, ‘back home … they already had … the sense of they’re part of an indigenous community, … whereas here … you had to tell people’ [A4, regional]. It came to his attention that the Aboriginal flag was flown at the school only during Reconciliation Week, whereas he felt strongly that ‘it should be up’ on a permanent basis.

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15 Only the participant’s own letter is reproduced here. Neither the principal nor the MP were asked for comment on this account.
Accordingly, within the first semester he began to advocate for a flagpole to be erected close to the school’s entrance point so that the Aboriginal flag might fly alongside the school and Australian flags, that were already in situ. In the first instance he enlisted the help of a ‘really smart, quick typist’ in the boarding house to whom he dictated a letter to the principal. He claimed that for some time his letter was ignored and that the principal ‘just swept it under the rug … just shrugged it off’, but eventually a meeting was arranged. He prepared for this by looking ‘on the internet’ for ‘the rules about flags at school … private schools’. He learned that ‘there’s no rule about that’, although there are established protocols that govern the order and manner in which flags should be displayed (Parliament of Australia 1953).

His account suggests that the tone of the meeting was defensive: in response to the principal’s query as to whether he had ’done any research’, he ‘just went bang and slapped it on the table, which shocked him a bit I reckon, because he had nothing to say after that’.

Intuiting that this issue impacted a wide range of stakeholders, he urged that ‘people would donate to have a flagpole put up… and it wouldn’t be hard’. The principal’s response dismayed him:

If he says yes to have [the flag] up, what’s going to stop one of the other boys wanting their flag up in the school too you know? Like the international boys … what’s going to stop one of them asking to have their flag up …saying it’s part of their school you know…? And I said it’s not going to happen because it isn’t on their land, and this is Aboriginal land… but it was like talking to a brick wall.

[A4, regional]

His argument shows how little the principal understood the young man’s legitimate need to be explicitly recognised in the school’s embodied culture. By suggesting that First Australian students’ standing in this school was no different to that of international students who travel to Australia at the start of each school term and return home at the close of business, the principal was making a deeply offensive statement about the place of First Australians in the school and in the nation state. It is a powerful political statement
to fly a flag. To suggest that this act would have been tokenistic was at best naïve, and at worst disingenuous.

More determined than ever, the following year in anticipation of Reconciliation Week, he repeated his request, penning the letter that is reproduced below as Figure 5.

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Dear--------,

Reconciliation is to come together. In Australia it is a term used to refer to the bringing together of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Supporting reconciliation means working together to overcome the reasons there are division and inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. An important cause of this division is misunderstanding, prejudice and racism. Many non-indigenous people still know little about our people and our history.

We should work together to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to exercise my people’s distinctive rights as the first people of Australia. Support for indigenous rights is crucial because Australia cannot become a reconciled nation until my people’s rights and culture are respected and indigenous people are able to stand together on an equal footing with non indigenous Australians. For example an acknowledgement of country is a way of showing respect for traditional owners both past and present and of recognising their continuing connection to country. This recognition is at the very top heart of reconciliation but reconciliation has got a lot to do with recognition. The two go hand in hand. That is why [school] needs to recognise that it is on aboriginal land and that the aboriginal students contribute to [school] and the contribution [school] makes to aboriginal students.

I propose that we should put up a third flag pole and fly the aboriginal flag alongside the [school] and Australian flags. The indigenous boys can feel more proud... and see their flag flying high... and make them feel like they belong. Also for the non-indigenous [sic] boys to make them feel a part of the true Australian culture. And to let them know that we do indeed walk side by side. As a school we should stand up to what’s right and recognise the indigenous connection this school has. Not only to the boys but to the land and the wider indigenous community. Let’s be the first ones to make the change and lead from the front. Help us to help our culture survive and fly the aboriginal flag everyday [sic] of the year.

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Showing a sophisticated awareness of how hierarchies of power operated within the school, he copied this second letter to the vice-principal and the school’s governing body, as a way of ensuring that ‘he can’t … brush it off that everyone could see what I was doing’. He recounted an imagined conversation, where the principal was held accountable for his intransigence, when others in positions of power would ask ‘oy, what’s going on here?’. But again, he was disappointed.

A period of negotiation followed during which he invoked the help of the Member of Parliament for his local region. He elected not to contact the school’s local member, because ‘they wouldn’t get it either because they’re a city person’.

The young man recounted that his Principal repeatedly referred to work the school does ‘for’ Indigenous communities as if to suggest that charitable enterprise amply discharged any moral responsibility the school might have had to address racial power differentials implicit in the school’s culture. From the student’s perspective, there was nothing to indicate that the Principal understood why flying the Aboriginal flag would be significant, but he was incredulous at the response he received:

I got a … letter back, and it said … something along the lines of … I don’t believe there should be any flags up…because he doesn’t believe in having flags up and stuff, which I thought was a load of crap. And then … just trying to brush it off in the letter … talking about oh we do like everything else, but just nothing about the flag.

[A4, regional]

In the end a compromise was reached but his final word was perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the whole affair:
The last thing he had to say ...was he didn’t know how people would react if it was up, and he didn’t think that people would like it if it was up, and he said that he would put it up in front of the library, which is indoors ...out the front there, for the rest of the year, and see what people thought about it, and then go from there. But obviously, nothing’s been done...

What had begun as a simple request for official recognition in the school’s built environment, developed into a three-year and ultimately unsuccessful crusade to have the Aboriginal flag fly in the school.

The school in this case embodied structures of power that are deeply entwined with perpetuating a social system of privilege, in keeping with Bourdieu’s ideas of social reproduction. Australia’s business and professional elite send their sons to schools like this precisely because it provides them with an education that equips them to participate in and benefit from those same social structures (Finn 2012, Kenway, 2013, 2014). To those on the inside (Geertz 1979), these structures are so taken for granted that they are functionally invisible, but once challenged they reveal themselves in obdurate ways. In response to his argument that the school ‘is on Aboriginal land’ the principal refused to give any ground: A4 recalled that ‘it was like talking to a brick wall’.

Critical race scholarship confirms that a trend for institutions to ignore race in favour of a ‘colourblind’ approach has permeated the cultural ethos in the US (Pollock 2004, Tarca 2005, Bonilla-Silva 2006, Lewis 2006, Modica 2015). Modica argues that colourblind ideology is ‘a powerful political tool because it allows whites to ignore present inequity while maintaining their status of privilege’ (p397). In her studies on the effects of racism in education, she finds that race continues to be a crucial factor in maintaining the hierarchical power structures upon which society was built (p398). This young man’s experience suggests the same: insistence on a single school identity that encompassed students of all racial backgrounds but overlooked or underplayed the history and circumstance of First Australian students’ rightful place in the school had at its core an assimilationist ideal which was essentially racist.
Framed within the wider socio-political landscape of Indigenous education in Australia this anecdote is useful in exposing structures of power and privilege. By interrogating the extent to which the Aboriginal flag came to embody one student’s perception of his legitimate place within a wider Anglo-centric school community, questions emerge around the understanding stakeholders brought to Indigenous student scholarship programs.

AIEF (2015) quotes the principal of a Victorian school as saying:

‘When I left my last school I said one of the most interesting things is not what we did for Indigenous kids, but what Indigenous kids did for us. That’s a much more interesting story. What I learnt is to be receptive to change because of those kids. We were different as a school. We were different as individuals. The Indigenous students changed me’ (p63).

This young man’s account is at odds with this type of rhetoric. His story suggests that his principal saw the school’s Indigenous program as an outworking of its social justice agenda and only that. He was not ‘receptive to change’ in the wider school culture, and actively resisted the young man’s attempts at transforming it. Symbolic leadership actions were perceived as unnecessary and unhelpful to what he saw as the more important goal of maintaining a single, cohesive school identity (Subasic & Reynolds 2009). Recognition of First Australian students’ unique position in the school or any legitimate expectation of symbolic representation were ‘swept … under the rug you know… just shrugged it off’.

While this school was prepared to accept First Australian students, and publically extolled the transformative impact they had on the school community, the account of this student’s attempt to fly the Aboriginal flag suggests that the experience of performing one’s identity as a young Aboriginal person in that environment was not unproblematic. The issue of displaying an Aboriginal artefact was not in question; rather it was the message implicit in the flag flying from a flagpole that gave this school leader pause. When asked how he felt about the compromise that was eventually reached, whereby the flag would be displayed outside the school library to ‘see what people thought about it’, the young man was nonplussed: he recognised that a flag ‘thumb-tacked to the wall’ did not send the same message of sovereign right and legitimate belonging within the community as a
flag displayed pursuant to official protocol. As for the longer-term outcome of the ‘trial’ display of the flag, he responded curtly ‘I wouldn’t have a clue. I haven’t been back’. The justification given for the principal’s intransigence, that ‘he didn’t know how people would react if it was up, and he didn’t think that people would like it if it was up’, called into question his belonging in that community.

This young man’s experience is consistent with Bourdieu’s observation that systems or fields can be changed by the actors on the stage, but that transformations follow predictable patterns which align with the interests of the institution: In Reproduction (1990) Bourdieu & Passeron argue that ‘every transformation of the education system takes place in accordance with a logic in which the structure and function proper to the system continue to be expressed’ (p95). When the Principal steadfastly refused to critically examine and adapt the school’s symbolic representation of itself so as to affirm the true history of the land on which it stands, the student activist’s standing within the community was inevitably called into question. He was then put to his election: should he embrace the school’s culture notwithstanding the lack of Indigenous representation? Should he allow himself to identify with the symbols that publically proclaim all that the school stands for, knowing that they have at their heart an immovable, euro-centric, hegemonic view of the world? Or does he strike out in opposition to it? Like Hamlet before him, he was forced to evaluate the world order as it then stood and ask ‘whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them?’ (Hamlet, Act III Scene i).

For a young man who resided at the school, far from family and community who encourage and support his identity as a First Australian young person, this decision would inevitably have been fraught with complexity and would have fundamentally recalibrated the cost-benefit equation informing his participation in school life. This case study is revelatory of the durability- perhaps the essential immovability- of the school’s institutional habitus. Perhaps more important is that it also unmasks the substantial psychic cost (Reay 2002, Ingram 2011) incurred by this student as he prosecuted the case for symbolic recognition within the school setting. Over the course of his three-year campaign he came to understand the magnitude of the misalignment between his personal habitus as a young Aboriginal man, and the institutional habitus of one of Australia’s
oldest and most prestigious boarding schools. The psychological cost of engagement at school inevitably escalated in like measure.

Research emerging from the Australian National University (Biddle 2014) finds that where school might be perceived as promulgating values that are in conflict with those of the student’s home culture, there is an associated stigma in investing in the institution. Biddle makes the point that ‘although these costs and benefits are unlikely to be explicitly weighed up by the individual on a daily basis, they are likely to be reflected on from time to time, and influence a person’s habits and norms’ (p8). Insofar as his self-image derived from his integration into the school community (Tajfel 1986), we can only imagine how this young man’s investment in education was impacted by the battle he waged with the school principal to have the Aboriginal flag flown at his school over a three-year period. In a later conversation, he reflected that he had ‘shut down’ by the middle of his Year 12 and that there was no one in the school hierarchy who he was prepared to open up to. He identified a number of factors that contributed to his feeling an outsider at school, but his conflict with the principal was central, as he felt that school leadership most accurately represented the unseen attitudes and values of the institution as a whole [private conversation, A4, April 2016]. His response is consistent with literature that describes resistant responses to schools where students’ knowledge base is neither recognised nor celebrated. ‘Resistance’ is a recurring theme in academic literature, where students associate success in mainstream school to ‘whiteness’ and therefore actively choose to disengage (Ogbu 2003, Beresford 2012, Kenway 2013, Nakata 2007, 2012, Bishop 2003).

To the extent that school programs fail to address institutional organisation and assimilationist ideals of sameness, theorists contend that their impact can do a double harm to young people (Young 1990). Young argues that discussion of injustice should not be cast only in terms of redistribution (here making places available in fee paying schools), but also in terms of the recognition of difference. For her the irony of insisting on a single, unified whole is that the differences that are ignored or overlooked generate a dichotomy instead of unity: a ‘them and us’ that undermines the very foundations of social justice initiatives. Consistent with this argument, data presented here indicate that beyond providing scholarship places, schools, scholarship providers and policy makers
need to develop greater critical awareness of assumptions that underpin school cultures especially insofar as they act to constrain First Australian students.
Chapter 8

Trauma

Close to one hundred percent of participants in this study acknowledged or intimated that antecedent, home or school-based trauma was a factor in their lives. For many, it also acted as a constraint on their educational engagement and achievement.

There are currently no studies exploring how trauma affects Indigenous boarding school students (McCalman, Bainbridge, Russo & colleagues 2016), although it is known that transitions to boarding school create particular stressors that may impact education engagement. These include changes in residence; cultures, including language; autonomy; educational standards; roles, responsibilities and expectations; parental influence; personal freedom; and relationships (Mander 2015a, 2012, McCalman et al. 2016). Further, and as discussed above, participants reported that they were often confronted with institutional discrimination and racism that they described as traumatic.

Beyond trauma associated with change or school-based traumatic events, national and state based survey data find that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience higher rates of stressful events than the general population (Askew 2013, Zubrick et al. 2006, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009). This is also true for First Australian young people who experience trauma (from once-off or on-going events) both through their own direct experience and through secondary exposure (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (AIHW & AIFS) 2013).

Brunzell, Stokes & Waters (2015, p4) suggest that teachers are well positioned to be ‘front line trauma healers’ in the context of the classroom’ (italics in the original), but data in this study suggest that this was not the experience of most participants. On the contrary, a number suggested that their school experience compounded past trauma. Their testimonies highlight the need for schools to understand how antecedent trauma and stressful events occurring in home communities affect First Australian students.
What is trauma and what effect does it have?

Trauma arises from events that are psychologically overwhelming for an individual and which threaten their physical or emotional wellbeing (Randall 2013, Perry 2006). These include individualised experiences, but also the social context in which a person lives (Randall 2013, Zehr 2009). Where trauma is caused by prolonged exposure to stressful situations, such as in the case of growing up in poverty, experiencing ill-health, sexual or substance abuse, domestic violence, bullying or neglect, a child often does not receive an immediate care response and in some instances may be shamed by or blamed for events (Brunzell et al. 2015, Hopkins 2013). Adverse life circumstances and chronic stressors during early childhood have a lasting impact on development, including social and emotional wellbeing, physical and mental health, and on educational outcomes (Askew 2013, Anda 2006, Perry 2006).

Trauma in childhood sculpts and shapes neurological responses in varied ways (Randall 2013, Perry 1995). Where a trauma response flows from chronic, multiple or on-going traumatic situations, responses are complex and may include a range of behaviours that negatively affect a child’s education (Brunzell et al. 2015). In particular, primal ‘fight or flight’ responses are activated, and victims of trauma live in a persistent state of ‘hyperarousal’, where such responses are quickly and easily triggered. Alternatively, victims may develop a sensitised ‘dissociative’ pattern of behavior, where they respond to perceived danger or threats by ‘freezing’: retreating into their own world and becoming unresponsive to adult requests or demands. In school settings, these behaviours are often taken as signs of defiance. Perry et al. (1995) describe how situations of conflict can easily escalate when a student brings a history of trauma to school:

‘When adults around them ask them to comply with some directive, they may act as if they haven't heard or they "refuse." This forces the adult - a teacher, a parent, a counselor - to give the child another set of directives. Typically, these directives involve more threat. The adult will say, "If you don't do this, I will. ." The nonverbal and verbal character of this "threat" makes the child feel more anxious, threatened, and out of control. The more anxious the child feels, the quicker the child will move from anxious to threatened, and from threatened to terrorized … If sufficiently terrorized, the "freezing" may escalate into complete dissociation’(p280).
In addition to these neuro-adaptive responses, antecedent trauma has a profound and ongoing impact on learning through decreased cognitive capacity, poor memory and concentration, language delays, and the inability to create and sustain positive relationships with peers, teachers, and carers (Brunzell et al 2015. Anda, Felitti, Bremner et al.’s (2006) large scale epidemiological study of adults who reported adverse childhood experiences in their youth found that traumatised students were more likely to have been suspended or expelled, failed a grade, have lower academic achievement assessments, be at significant risk for language delays, and be assigned to special education. This highlights the primacy of schools having a good understanding of students’ home situations and past life experiences if they are to optimise educational opportunities despite students’ antecedent trauma. The need for appropriate professional development programs for staff is also evident.

Schools have an important role to play in creating safe spaces for traumatised youth to overcome past adversity by addressing deficiencies and building strengths (Brunzell et al. 2015, Bainbridge, 2014), but children who grow up in violent or chaotic environments develop a hyper-awareness to their surroundings. This results in a persistent stress-response state that is not conducive to learning and reduces the likelihood of participation in education (Perry 2006, Hopkins 2013). By providing structure, predictability and a sense of safety schools can help affected students feel safe enough to begin to learn (Perry 2006, p25).

Trauma-informed models of teaching and learning focus on the two broad domains: helping students to self-regulate stress responses and impulses; and building relational capacities. These approaches assist affected students to strengthen their capacity to learn and develop positive inter-personal relationships (Brunzell et al. 2015, p9). Brunzell, Stokes & Waters find that mitigating negative factors should be coupled with education approaches that build psychological resources. They propose a trauma-informed positive education model. This integrates the counter-perspective of positive education into approaches focusing on the repair of trauma responses. By working to increase students’ positive emotions, an ‘upward spiral of benefit’ ensues that builds resilience and maximises education engagement and success (Brunzell et al. 2015).
Policy approaches preferencing boarding education for First Australian students do not acknowledge the manner or extent to which antecedent trauma is a factor in education underperformance (Wilson 2014). A number of interviews in this study were conducted with school leaders in remote or regional schools with a large or exclusively Aboriginal cohort. In each case, sophisticated, trauma informed policies were in place to meet students’ particular health needs. One school principal spoke about the health-related policies and procedures that had been developed in his school. He expressed frustration that government funding for these programs had been removed. The school had had to systematically cut back on the health services that supported students, even though he saw these as integral to the education program. By contrast, mainstream boarding schools serving a largely white middle-classed demographic are ill-prepared to be proactive in meeting the emotional and psycho-social needs of vulnerable young people from a diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds. This has particular consequences for students from remote and very remote communities who are sent to board in predominantly non-Indigenous schools in urban centres, where institutions are, by definition, geographically and culturally a long way from home. It also maximises the chance that schools will continue to learn ‘by trial and error’ (AIEF 2015). These dynamics combine and militate against good education outcomes.

Rather than acknowledge the potential for well-resourced schools to contribute to healing and growth for traumatised youth, AIEF (2015, p51) cautions that scholarship applicants with the highest needs may not have ‘the necessary skills and emotional resilience to complete their studies’. They acknowledge the high percentage of First Australian young people for whom trauma may be a visible or invisible influence at play in their education outcomes, but do not explore the role that schools have in helping them to overcome it. Their *Compendium of Best Practice* claims that it is ‘essential’ for schools to ‘examine an Indigenous student’s former school reports and attendance records ‘to assist them in judging whether that student will be successful at their school’ (p72). It also cautions that many boarding schools ‘lack the appropriate experience, expertise and support structures’ to meet the needs of ‘Indigenous students from low SES backgrounds’ (p49). This is a curious statement as the majority of Indigenous scholarship students are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
The failure to acknowledge the prevalence and psycho-social consequences of trauma, or schools’ potential to remediate it, has implications for young people who have no secondary education opportunities at home (Mander 2015a, McCalman 2016). Many highly motivated and able students may derive great benefit from attending well-resourced and high performing schools, antecedent trauma notwithstanding (Brendtro 2005, Sarra 2011, Brunzell et al. 2015, Perry 1995, McCalman 2016, Israelashvili 2005). This is evident from data informing this study.

Incidence and the enduring impact of antecedent trauma

Most participants in this study described having experienced trauma at some time in their lives. Often trauma was trans-generational, in some cases the legacy of past government policy; a number reported that one or both of their parents were members of the Stolen Generations and that this had a persistent negative impact. For others, it was the death of close family members either before they left home or while they were away at school. This included the death of a parent, or a grandparent, or the chronic or acute illness of loved ones. Some had experienced the incarceration of close family members, substance abuse or family violence. A number alluded to suffering mental health issues (anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, attempted suicide) before or during their time at school. Several alluded to traumatic life events without elaborating further. All but one participant reported having experienced parental divorce or separation, in some cases while they were away at school. A number reflected that more than one of these phenomena was a part of their lived experience.

For some, the experience of attending boarding school became a source of trauma in its own right. Apart from issues surrounding poorly managed transition to school, many participants reported that the stress of leaving home compounded past trauma. Sometimes this was because distance rendered them powerless to respond to ongoing situations at home. For others, the reality of difficult home situations was a constant, and the health and wellbeing ramifications of this became apparent when they moved to school. An example emerged during an interview with a former boarding house master at an elite boys’ boarding school. He recounted sitting at his desk one night when a Year 7 boy emerged from his room:
One night he came out ... just sobbing, sobbing and he came out and he said, I just keep seeing it in my head like a video of my mum being hurt and injured and bleeding - and this was his step-mum who he saw as his mum ... it was his dad who’d inflicted these injuries, but ... he never acknowledged that.

One can only wonder at the heavy psychological burden carried by this young man. Added to the distress of re-living previous traumatic events in his mind, was the anxiety that physical separation from his mother engendered. His experience was not uncommon; both male and female participants described feeling guilty at leaving mothers or younger siblings in vulnerable situations. For some the conflicting narratives running in their heads, on the one hand personal opportunity and liberation, but on the other responsibility and belonging in family, left them so confused and anxious that they reported suicidal ideation or attempted suicide.

It is significant that a number of parent and grandparent participants in this study cited dysfunction at home as the primary reason for sending their child to boarding school (cf. AIEF 2015)\(^\text{16}\). This is consistent with Mander’s study that found that problematic social issues present in their home community and at their local school reinforced to participants the benefits of completing their secondary education at a boarding school (Mander 2015). Whereas physical safety and educational opportunity was one priority, a number reflected that over time, cultural and emotional safety became increasingly important to their education outcomes. This issue is explored further in the case study that follows and affirms literature describing the multifactorial needs of First Australian young people, direct legacies of colonisation (McCalman et al 2016).

Far from acting in a healing capacity, schools that failed to recognise the outworking of trauma, risked compounding it. A recurring theme in the data was the lack of understanding schools had of what was really going on inside students’ heads. Many

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\(^{16}\) The ‘Compendium’ (2015) quotes one school leader as saying it is ‘fairly rare these days’ that students are sent to boarding school to avoid a destructive home environment but ‘What we’re able to do in those situations is provide for the physical needs of the students, so they are getting a healthy diet and clothing and so forth, which may have been missing from the community.’ (p. 50) Any responsibility the school might have had to address the wider health and well-being needs of the student was not acknowledged.
participants expressed frustration at how little schools sought to understand their predicament, so blinded were they by the ultimate goal of having them complete Year 12. The words of participant A1 cited earlier are again prescient here:

Don’t do it for statistics. Like do it for the people. Sometimes I feel like it’s just sort of like .. it looks good, but really it’s like pretty crazy what’s going on inside the kid’s head [...] it will be like dangerous… well not dangerous, but it will be annoying to them... if I’m going to ask what’s wrong with you over and over, it’ll be annoying and it will make it worse.

[A1, very remote]

His statement highlights the danger of schools working toward a fixed and immovable objective of Year 12 completion and seeking no insight into the lived experience of students. Participants from all sorts of backgrounds and family situations corroborated this; although this young man was from a very remote community, the remoteness of a young person’s home did not appear to be a strong differentiating factor where trauma was a factor impacting them at school.

Many participants recounted how staff reacted to resistant behaviours that are well described in literature (Brunzell et al. 2015, Anda 2006, Ogbu 2003, Beresford & Gray 2012) in a punitive fashion. Whereas best practice would recommend working to empower the young person and restore a sense of autonomy and control over his or her own actions and reactions (Brunzell et al. 2015, McCalman 2016), warning signs went unrecognised. A number described feeling misunderstood at boarding school and increasingly powerless. They responded by ‘acting out trying to survive’ [P12]. One participant, guardian to an Aboriginal student in a large girls’ school, reflected on how staff responded to clinically worrying behaviours as if they were defiant:

She would just sleep and she wouldn’t wake up, and they would complain, rather than … thinking gosh, this girl wasn’t up at this particular time, therefore there’s a concern there ... it was seen as her being disobedient or her not adhering to the rules, or ... rather than saying, wow, this is a danger sign for mental health.

[P23, urban]
Other participants emphasised how important it is for schools to take time to understand student misbehaviour and see it within the whole context of a young person’s life. A number were university students at the time they were interviewed, and amongst that cohort, the sentiment ran particularly strong that schools failed to recognise the outworking of trauma. A number observed that young people never ‘act up’ for no reason, and expressed frustration that schools did not make any attempt to think about the broader context of their lives. Several were intent on returning to their previous school to ensure that other Indigenous students did not need to experience the similar suffering. In the words of one young woman:

> I’ll learn your way so that I can talk your way, so then what I want to say to you you will understand…I’m really trying to get my foot back in the door at [boarding school] to be like, okay … this is how you taught me to talk – now I’m going to tell you what we need to start doing here, and actually being what I didn’t get at school.

[20, urban]

Participation in this study was an opportunity to set the record straight on what was really happening in young people’s lives during their boarding school years. On several occasions interviewees reflected that it was important to tell their story so that others would not need to suffer as they had. This is consistent with Mander’s assertion that few dialogic spaces exist in the literature for Aboriginal young people to ‘speak back’ to an adult-centric system (Mander 2015b). This extended also to adult participants who reported feeling that their authority as parents was diminished in school settings where others ‘knew better’.

The constraining impact of trauma on educational endeavour highlights almost more than any other issue the paradox facing First Australian students who attend boarding school in their secondary years. While leaving a difficult home situation may afford a young person physical safety and the opportunity to build a new life through education, very little attention is given either in the literature or in policy to the on-going psychological burden of trauma. When a young person brings a history of trauma with them to school or when stressful life events unfold while they are away at school, common sense and
neuroscience concur that education outcomes will be adversely affected and that schools have an important role to play.

The two case studies following are illustrations of how trauma manifest for two alumni participants.

**Case Study 2: Participant A34 [very remote].**

This young woman comes from a very remote community. Her primary schooling was undertaken via School of the Air in an outstation, population eight. She is fluent in four languages and understands six. At age 12 she left home to attend an Aboriginal boarding school interstate where she studied until the age of 16. When she completed her time there she was described as ‘the most successful graduate we have ever produced’ [private conversation, school principal].

By her own choice and with little if any parental involvement, the following year she moved into Year 11 at a large independent girls’ boarding school. There was no formal transition process: she reported having visited the school only once, after other students had broken up for the Christmas holidays. She commenced the following February, several days after term had begun due to complications in securing Abstudy funding. She was not met at the airport, but given a phone number to use if problems arose and told to catch a taxi to the boarding house.

She described her new school as ‘massive and really fancy’. She reported that she ‘had a hard time understanding what I was doing’, but was reluctant to ask for help as:

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I felt like they would have judged me and thought I was stupid, because most of the other girls at schools like that are really fancy, and most of them were rich and smart girls … and I just didn’t want anyone to judge me and make me feel like I wasn’t meant to be there.
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[A34]
She was allocated a room with an international student and the two quickly came to realise that they had nothing in common: they rearranged the room to demarcate their respective territories, and adopted ‘a silent thing inside the room and everything like that’.

There were other Aboriginal students at the school, but she found that she had nothing in common with them either, because they were all from urban backgrounds and were ‘well dressed, had really good English and you know grew up with really good families’.

Socially isolated and overwhelmed by the volume of schoolwork, her mental health began to suffer. She recalled:

I had really bad anxiety because I didn’t know what I was doing, I always felt like I was doing something wrong, I didn’t really talk to much people about it because I didn’t have that many friends there, and … it was just a really hard year. I had really bad dreams, my grades were failing, and I just wouldn’t interact with anyone because you know I couldn’t click with anyone.

Suffering anxiety was not a new experience for her, she recounted:

I’ve had anxiety since I was eight. I don’t know how it started up. I was just sitting there talking to our teacher on the internet …, and it just started up, and my home tutor knew what was happening, and he took me to my room and gave me a paper bag to breathe in and out of, and from then on I just had a lot of … anxiety attacks throughout the year.

She gave a vivid description of experiencing a panic attack:

I figured out that my anxiety was triggered on my brain thinking that I’d done something wrong … So whenever I’d done something wrong, like believed I’d done something wrong was when I’d start hankering into … a panic attack … I’d feel this tightening in my chest and … I’d have trouble breathing and … everything would go into fast forward, … you would see everybody’s limbs and
… everything would be really, really fast. The worst that I’ve had it, it lasted for about five hours... that was excruciating.

It appeared that the boarding school had not been forewarned about her struggles with anxiety, and when it became a problem at school, staff took her to a local GP. Neither her parents nor her guardian were consulted or informed about the issue. She was prescribed anti-depressants, which she took in escalating doses ‘virtually every morning’. At the same time, she dropped back from Year 11 to Year 10 at her own request. She recounted: ‘they agreed with me because I wasn’t very smart, my Maths and English skills weren’t that good’. Neither measure did much to help: she reported that over time she came to feel ‘even worse because I thought I was doing stuff wrong.’

It was clear that she had good insight into how to manage her mental health issues, but was unable to implement any of the coping strategies that she knew from experience would work. She had always played netball and was described by her guardian as a ‘talented player’. At her new school, however, she was unable to join the team because it would cost money. Her parents were paying half fees already and she explained:

I just didn’t feel like … burdening mum and dad with even more money to pay… So I didn’t have any sports to let out all my frustration and anger, because that’s usually what I do with sports. And I only had a small amount of friends, and that made me even worse because I’ve always like have tons of friends and all of that stuff.

She remained on anti-depressants throughout the year, but ceased to need them when she returned home:

On the holidays I didn’t take any because I totally forgot about it because I was really happy at being at home and everything like that, I totally forgot about it.
After one very unhappy year, she was offered the opportunity to change to a new school. Staff there had undergone professional development in working with trauma-affected adolescents and the school’s pedagogy centred on the principles of positive psychology. A two-year program was negotiated that would maximise her ability to cope with the academic load. At the end of her first year she was awarded the Year 12 Art prize and the principal purchased her work to hang in the school. Asked if she was still taking antidepressants she laughed and replied: ‘The only tablets I take are iron tablets’.
Case Study 3: Participants A29 and P12 [remote]

It is appropriate that the discussion of factors constraining participants’ engagement and attainment at school should conclude with this case. In many ways, the themes explored in these chapters coalesce in this young woman (participant A29)’s account of her secondary school experience. Thankfully, hers is a narrative in two parts, and her experiences at university make for happier reading\textsuperscript{17}. Her narrative was recounted in part in the first person, and in part by her mother (P12), who participated in both of the interviews we recorded. This created a dual perspective: the young woman spoke of her own experiences and emotions at school and as she transitioned to university; her mother gave an account of her daughter’s school years, but also spoke of the challenges she encountered in seeking to advocate for her within the school system. Themes of loneliness and social isolation; identity; racism and the prevalence of deficit mindsets; asymmetries of power; schools’ failure to appreciate the impact of antecedent trauma and the misinterpretation of resistant behaviours, come together in this case. In order to understand the implications of this young woman’s narrative I worked through the de-identified transcript of her interview with Tom Brunzell, senior education advisor at Berry Street Childhood Institute. Tom presents internationally on topics of transforming school cultures, high expectations for differentiated instruction, trauma-informed practice, wellbeing and the application of positive psychology, and effective school leadership. He is also a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Centre for Positive Psychology and Youth Research Centre, studying trauma-informed pedagogy, positive psychology, and their impacts on workplace meaning.

This young woman and her mother come from a remote community. She commenced boarding away from home in Year 7 and over the course of her secondary years attended a number of different schools. At the time of being interviewed she was a third-year university student who aspired to a future as a filmmaker. She was articulate, insightful and making great progress through her undergraduate degree, but before the recording device was switched on she declared ‘I am no good at talking’. It was clear from the outset that speaking about her school years was difficult; from an animated and interesting

\textsuperscript{17} The second half of her narrative is presented as Case Study 5 in Chapter 10
conversation about documentary making, she became defensive and reluctant to speak as soon as the recording began.

It soon became obvious that recording this interview was distressing. Her mother, who was also present, offered to take over, encouraging her that hers is a story that needs to be told. The young woman agreed and elected to stay in the room, interjecting from time to time, correcting her mother’s account or adding a detail here or there. Twice she requested that her mother refrain from explaining events in detail because they would upset her. The tenet of the interview was one of shattered expectations and disappointed dreams that had left both mother and daughter hurt and angry.

Her mother’s account began on a positive note; she described ‘a really vibrant, young, happy girl you know, very passionate, very boisterous’. She volunteered that at the time her daughter started at boarding school ‘You could always have a good argument too because one of the other things that she talked about was being a lawyer’. She reflected on her passion for music and her talent in playing flute, which had led to her being offered a position at a specialist music college in the city. There was an overtone of pride in her observation that her daughter had merited a place in the school through her musical and academic talents, not by dint of a social justice agenda.

Beyond the expectation that her child would get ‘a really good education’, she did not extrapolate on her motivation for sending the child to boarding school, although the younger woman was adamant that:

My main reason to get out of [remote community] was because the school there was horrible ... just not many people got through Year 12 there’

[A29].

While neither participant spoke in detail about the girl’s behaviour at school, it was clear that the transition to boarding life was not easy. The mother conceded that her daughter did not settle without problems, but explained:
She was just thirteen... and it was all new to her, she was just a young girl with all her teenageness, hormones and all that, trying to find her way. Very brave to venture out, and there were some incidents that the college… they’d ring and I’d have to fly down, I think it was four times in that whole year I had to fly from [remote community] to [capital city] to help her.

This account suggests that the school relied heavily on parental support in dealing with issues that arose. We are left wondering whether staff understood what lay behind her behaviours, and what local or intra-school supports and interventions were put in place to assist her. Her mother did not think there were many:

To me and from my understanding is that they just did not appreciate at all or have any structure to try and help her. If she didn’t fit their mould, she was not accepted.

Later in the interview she reported that in addition to problems in the boarding house, the day school became ‘another ordeal’, and that over time her daughter came to actively resist the teaching program. The mother’s anger and disappointment was manifest when she described how her daughter ‘didn’t want to conform to the little music programme’, a far cry from her initial excitement at her girl going off ‘with all of these dreams and expectations ... to a real mainstream boarding school.’

Despite this conflict and against all odds, her daughter persevered in the school and began to ‘find her way through the system’, but she increasingly resented the music program that had attracted her in the first place:

She didn’t appreciate the music what they wanted, she said it was all boring and rubbish, but they said, oh but you have to have that grounding in all of the old music. But [she] couldn’t learn it, she said she’d rather learn something like Pocahontas music … not this old boring Bach and everything else.
The young woman elaborated: ‘I taught myself how to play the flute. It was hard having a teacher telling me what to do’.

Even though she was ‘self-accomplished, a natural learner’, nothing about her playing conformed to the expectations of the college. Her mother reflected ‘even the methodology of it was wrong’. Any sense of agency or pride in either her talent or her accomplishment in teaching herself to play a notoriously difficult instrument had been lost. An increasing overtone of resistance crept in as the young woman reported being ‘forced’ to sing in choir, even though ‘I don’t know how to sing’. She volunteered that she no longer plays the flute and that she ‘kind of hated it after going to the school’ [A29].

To contextualise her daughter’s behaviours at school, the mother recounted a series of traumatic and dislocating events impacting the extended family unit. She described her experience of divorce, living as a single mother, a period in which her other children were experiencing significant trauma of their own. There was a time when she admitted that she ‘was just a mental wreck... having finished the you know the divorce and all that stuff’ and how ‘for a period I was on drugs, I was mentally incompetent’. Added to this was the death of her brother in tragic circumstances, shortly followed by her father’s passing. Emotional difficulties were compounded by an annual routine where ‘we would get all our furniture, put it in storage and then go back and find a new place to rent’. Clearly nothing was straightforward either in life or the school system.

If these dynamics form a problematic backdrop to this young woman’s school experience, she also had personal demons to deal with. In addition to the collateral damage that a little girl would be likely to sustain in the face of persistent and reoccurring family difficulties, her mother referred to the fact that ‘there’s something that happened in [my daughter’s] childhood... and that’s something that we’ve had to try and work through’. To these events her mother ascribed ‘things in her personality’ and the possibility that she may be suffering from a ‘border-line personality disorder’.

This information puts both her musical prowess and her resistant behaviours into a new relief. As discussed above, an important element in remediating trauma is to equip victims
with the skills to recognise their own heightened stress responses, and find ways to ‘de-escalate’ exaggerated fight or flight reactions to real or perceived conflict (Perry 2006, Brunzell 2015). In this case, the young woman had taught herself to play the flute to a level of proficiency that had merited a music scholarship to a specialist arts academy. Her self-regulatory responses to stress included both kinaesthetic and aesthetic elements: the physicality of playing the instrument combined with the music itself in her achieving a de-escalation of stress. To then be told that her ‘methodology’ of playing the flute was incorrect, and that her choice of music was inferior, deprived her of a two-pronged coping mechanism that she had devised to deal with her own stress responses. Far from creating a safe space to overcome antecedent trauma (Brunzell et al. 2015), in this case school acted as a site for diminishing her psychological resilience and overall wellbeing.

More damaging than the assumption that conforming to a particular mould was the only way of being a student at this college, was the school’s reaction to behaviour that they deemed aberrant:

…then they started labelling her that she was split personality and having all these things, and I said, no, I don’t think so. And then she was attached to a friend, and they even said, oh she’s got a co-dependency with this girl. And [she] had only been there what, one term and she was kicked out … it was really horrendous. [P12]

Many alumni participants described sticking closely, often exclusively, to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers, or finding a kindred spirit on whom they relied heavily to support their social and emotional wellbeing. In this case, however, the young woman’s friendship was described as a ‘co-dependency’, and the one relationship that sustained her at school was pathologised by authorities.

At thirteen years of age the girl was expelled from the boarding house after one term. By the time a process was agreed on to negotiate the situation, the young woman’s ability to engage was severely diminished:
… she was really shutdown by then, all the emotions and all that was happening, and when we went in for the interview to have it out in the open what was happening … and basically why they didn’t want her in the College, but I stood my ground.

A recurring theme to emerge from this interview was the mother’s sense of feeling consistently disempowered as she sought to advocate for her daughter. In this instance, the ‘white male’ school chaplain, appointed to support the mother and daughter, and the school staff member responsible for processing the complaint, were both described as ‘dominant males’ against whom the mother once again ‘stood [her] ground’. She reflected on the intersection between her gender, indigeneity and the knowledge that she was financially disadvantaged:

Within minutes of being in the presence of this guy, another dominant male who had apparently worked in the Aboriginal community so he knew everything about being Aboriginal and how to work with Aboriginal kids… he used all that knowledge to try to play it to our situation, being a bit of a bully actually, and we talked but they’d already made up their minds that they didn’t want [her] there because she was too much of a troubled child for them to care for, and that chaplain, he was no help. He didn’t do anything but agree with that guy, and I just thought well that’s good actually – in my gut I knew, yeah I’ve got to get my kid out of this place before they destroy her.

Her frustration was palpable as she described the dynamic in the interview:

I don’t know, … it’s just like racism, and you know it is, but you try and say to people that’s what it is, and no, you don’t have the evidence and things like that. So … it’s just all feeling and you feel that way or whatever, it’s not tangible, it’s not something that’s concrete, that you can grab it and say this is what it is.
The subtle hegemonic demand that she should give concrete evidence of the type of discrimination that she and her daughter faced, left her feeling further disempowered:

They can be patronising of your Aboriginality... the teaching profession is a lot of power, and if you don’t like what they have and you don’t fit into their framework, you’re on the out you know. [P12]

Fraser & Olson (2008) argue that matters of political representation (being heard and accorded a voice) are intrinsic to any conception of justice. Much of Fraser & Olson’s theorising relates to the distribution of power within macro-political spheres, but Keddie (2012) argues that Fraser’s analysis of political justice also has clear resonance with issues of representation within the sphere of education at a more micro-political level, such as those at stake here. In this case, the mother felt that she was consistently silenced, ignored or belittled by people (typically men) in positions of power. There is some irony in this: whereas ensuring that First Australian students have access to high-performing schools is at least in part justified by the logics of political representation (now and for the generations to come), for this mother, a denial of the same meant that her capacity to advocate for her daughter was curtailed.

She reflected on the nature of institutionalised racism, manifest here in the enactment of stereotypes. She described an insider/outsider dynamic where the balance of power rests squarely with the institution:

It’s like you don’t fit into that little box – out you go!! We only want little jack in the boxes here and when we lift the lid that’s the only time they come out and do things. [P12]

Some years later, the young woman was awarded another scholarship, this time to attend a prestigious girls’ boarding school for her final two years at school. By now the dreams and expectations described in the early stages of the interview had given way to a harsher reality. She was sixteen years old and under the care of a ‘psych team’. She had been
admitted to hospital more than once and labelled as having a ‘split personality’; a label that her mother opined ‘follows you’. Her uncle died shortly before she began at the school and the mother became distressed as she reflected on the school’s response;

… when they say they were f-ing culturally aware and sensitive when [she] was first there, … how insensitive were they to shift her room [sobbing] – a girl had lost her mother, and this girl having to deal with the death of her mother, thinking wouldn’t it be good to share it with [my daughter] who was going through her own grief and grieving, that’s their thinking, and they didn’t even get any Aboriginal insight into it.

These were the only two Aboriginal students in the school, and authorities presumably expected that the young women would support each other in their grief. In reality, mirrored grief compounded personal grief and minimised either student’s chance of making a happy start. For this young woman and others in the study, the school’s lack of understanding fed into a vicious cycle: rather that Brunzell et al.’s (2015) ‘upward spiral of benefit’ that comes from simultaneously working on vulnerabilities and building on strengths, these students experienced an inexorable spiral into despair that in this case led to adverse mental health outcomes.

It is not clear whether either school or scholarship provider had any real understanding of the multi-dimensional trauma that this participant had sustained prior to enrolling. Her mother gave no indication that authorities sought to understand why the young woman might be rebelling against school structures and protocols. Equally there is no sense that school and home were in a constructive partnership, or that any effective strategy had been developed to support this vulnerable young woman.

The mother became increasingly distraught as she recounted a series of events where her daughter was consistently portrayed as a troublemaker, although both mother and daughter cite instances where she was the victim of bullying, and particularly cyber-bullying through social media. She reflected:
... the way they painted her, like she was very rebellious, a little trouble-making stirrer, and you weren’t... [She] would shut up, clammed up, wasn’t going to share. It’s like they were wanting to get all this information out of her, what just to put into records and to say this is the way she’s behaving, we’re not failing you know. But I kept saying to [her], … it’s not us that are failing the system; it’s the system that fails us ... I don’t know even if words can express what it’s like for us with [her]. To have survived that ....

It is important to remember here that the educational options available at home were very limited. The mother in this case is a highly educated woman, with a Master’s degree in public health. She was confident about her daughter’s academic ability and proactive in asserting her right to a first-class education:

From the outset they said, because of all this emotional damage and psychological development problems that she’s not going to make it through – they were really encouraging us sideways to take her out of the place without actually kicking her out, but me having to stand my ground, and be really assertive and call in the big guns … they knew they couldn’t mess with me ‘cause I know how the system works and what our rights are. And so I had to fight for restorative justice that she could stay, and they were like oh it’s restorative justice, and I’m like, have you ever heard of that? Okay, go and look it up! … So it was a constant fight to keep her there.

This fight came at no small cost to either mother or daughter:

There were times that [daughter] just wanted to give up completely when she was really flat, and you know I’d say, but darling you go through these things, we all go through these things for a reason, […] we have to overcome these things if you want to help someone else, because someone’s going to look at you and say, wow, that girl had a bloody shit life, but look where she’s got and how she got through it. And so that’s what I would say to her because the same thing applied to me.
For these interviewees, participation in this research represented an opportunity to make sense of the trauma they had both experienced. Their desire to speak back to the system for the benefit of those still in it was one that many participants echoed. There was an added sense in interviews conducted with these women, that institutions should be held accountable for their attitudes and actions. The mother reflected at some length, and with great emotion, on her daughter’s valedictory dinner. This micro-moment seemed to epitomise all of the injustice that she and her daughter had endured during her secondary school years:

So when it was her graduation, that was just horrible because we should have been able to be joyous and celebrate … me and my other daughter went, and we sat at this great big huge round table in the worst position with these racist parents … And to sit at this table with these racist pigs on the other side who didn’t even acknowledge us there, and to feel so alienated and sick in the gut at this thing, and nobody to talk to … [sobbing] And do you know when people say, it’s so wonderful to graduate. How was your graduation? And you know, you can’t go, it was shit, and then to have to talk about that, because that’s what it was. And you think why? She’s just nobody in that big sea of all these rich white kids, and there’s a few occasional little multicultural kids that fit that little profile of being groomed into this Australian educational system you know. And … to me she was the greatest out of that whole room, you know having to survive everything. Yeah. No photos, no friends…

Reflecting on the supposed advantages bestowed through belonging to a prestigious alumni community, the mother’s cynicism was evident in her recurring and pejorative use of the adjective ‘little’:

… they invite you to be part of this [Boarding School] alumni and … they’ve got some little order … and you’ll always be part of this stuff. Well you know, is it worth it? Is it worth a little token ornament that they give you to be a member of
... a girls’ society? They made you feel like an outsider from the start because you weren’t from that little circle anyway, but we’ll allow you in because it will look good on our little government thing because we’ve got an Aboriginal kid, we’ve got a scholarship thing ...

At the end of the interview, she returned to the issue of racism, labels and the lack of cultural responsiveness in schools and in Australian society more generally:

Why do the Aboriginal kids have to fit into a framework that doesn’t fit us? … That’s why the retention rates are poor. That’s why we don’t succeed because we’re always having to fight and try and try and wear labels that aren’t us, and that’s how it works. … People are people and … unfortunately, most people just see you for your skin colour. But these days, even the lack of colour, because then you have to fight for your Aboriginality...

Notwithstanding this young woman identified boarding school as having eroded her confidence, she ‘astounded everybody because she got through and she passed’ [P12]. She transitioned to university and was one of only four participants in this study to be accepted into her course without the need for any bridging course.
Conclusion to Part 3

The rhetoric around Indigenous scholarship programs asserts that by attending the highest performing schools, First Australian students are enabled to ‘walk in two worlds’ (AIEF 2015, Benveniste 2015). This suggests that schools are sites of possibility, where circumstances of disadvantage are transformed, and barriers to learning can be overcome (Keddie 2012). It presupposes that attending boarding school does not adversely affect young people’s connection to home communities and culture, or their own health and wellbeing. The chapters in Part 3 have problematised those claims. They have identified and explored a number of factors that constrained young people’s engagement and educational advancement through boarding schools. These were described as also having ramifications for participants’ health, as well as their post school life and choices. These factors have roots in the worlds of home and school, and in the spaces in between. Some reflect the individual’s life experience and sense of self, some reflect institutional barriers that prevent First Australian students from ‘participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction’ (Fraser 2007, p27).

It is clear that a young person’s state of mind has a direct impact on education outcomes. Beresford, Partington & Gower (2012) find that successful schooling is largely dependent on the wellbeing of a child, and that school attendance is reflective of a student’s state of wellbeing and indicative of potential mental health issues (p224). Similarly, Zubrick et al. (2006) find a correlation between emotional wellbeing and educational performance. Higher levels of schooling are positively associated with social and emotional wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014), but little previous research has attempted to understand how different manifestations of homesickness, racism and racial stereotypes, and the power imbalance inherent in them impact the engagement and performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools. There is currently no research exploring whether or to what extent potential educational gains are cancelled out by the anguish First Australian students experience as they encounter one or more of these constraints during their time in boarding school.

The findings presented here extend current, sometimes-normalised understandings of how homesickness, racism and trauma work to constrain the educational engagement and
achievement of First Australian students in boarding schools. They suggest that schools need to develop a critical awareness of the costs as well as the benefits that accrue to these students through time spent at boarding school. Findings have implications for how schools work with students’ home communities; how they prioritise cultural obligations and opportunities; how they frame understandings of ‘success’; how they strike the balance between equity and sameness.

Most importantly, the narratives featured here highlight the need for predominantly non Indigenous boarding schools to look critically at their own school culture, and ensure that they are culturally safe places for students to live and learn. They challenge school leaders to rethink how they might most effectively amplify the voices First Australian students and their families, and empower them to ‘speak back’ to dominant cultural assumptions reified in school traditions, culture and curricula. Findings indicate that schools need to place a high priority on developing more in-depth understandings of students’ lives and commit to engaging holistically with communities and working more closely to empower families to support their young people studying away from home.

A recurring issue raised by participants centred on who had legitimacy to speak in difficult situations, and whose voice took precedence in identifying substantive issues and managing points of conflict. In discussing the issue of powerlessness as one of her five faces of oppression, Young (1990) describes the powerless as lacking the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals have. A fundamental aspect of her framework and that of other critical theorists (Freire 1993, Bourdieu 1973) is the notion of voice. She observes that ‘the privileged usually are not inclined to protect or advance the interests of the oppressed, partly because their social position prevents them from understanding those interests, and partly because to some extent their privilege depends on the continued oppression of others’ (p185). More than any other single issue, the diverse narratives that inform this study identified participants’ lack of voice as revealing the subtle and obdurate ways in which power imbalances in the school environment operated to constrain their education endeavours.
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Part 4

Enabling Education Engagement and Success
Introduction to Part 4

The Boarding School Experience: factors enabling engagement and attainment

To look only at what participants identify as constraining education outcomes would be to tell half a story, and perhaps the least helpful half at that. Harper (2015) recognises the importance of research that calls attention to ‘the underrepresentation, social isolation, cultural incongruence, academic hurdles, and racism that Black students endure on predominantly White campuses’. He cautions, however, that ‘the near-exclusive emphasis that this literature places on underachievement and barriers to Black student achievement, persistence and attainment’ is ‘problematic’ (p647). The same is true of much of the literature on Indigenous education in Australia.

The firsthand narrative accounts provided by participants in this research project help to make visible the competing loyalties, demands and aspirations that First Australian young people experience in boarding schools. However, they also give important insight into what factors or approaches families, schools and students themselves describe as enabling positive education and life outcomes. By analysing their stories through the theoretical lens described in Chapter 3 we are able not only to name what ‘is’ and what ‘should be’, but we can frame a better understanding of the legitimate role participants feel boarding schools are already playing in enabling educational advancement and, in some cases, describe as disrupting the trans-generational reproduction of disadvantage.

The chapters in Part 4 focus on the factors that were reported as enabling education engagement and success for participants. There is a purpose to these chapters following the stories of constraint contained in Part 3. Taken together those narratives have built up a picture, a meta-narrative, that reveals a fundamental failure of relationship. They speak to a social justice agenda being implemented with noble intention by good people working in excellent schools, but they also testify to the high cost of young people leaving home to enter a brave new world that does not understand where they have come from, and can only image where they are going to in Eurocentric, achievement oriented terms.
By contrast the chapters that follow here speak to the transformative possibilities of education where families, schools and communities work together to create new futures for First Australian young people. Ironically, data here suggest that where respect for First Australian values and perspectives, arrived at through effective dialogic relationships, supplants a presumption that ‘we know what is best for you’, young people achieve more highly on empirically measured matrices of success. The testimonies of alumni currently studying in tertiary institutions where inclusive and culturally respectful programs had been implemented, revealed increased levels of achievement relative to their school outcomes. While these may reflect multi-factorial differences between school and university, many participants identified cultural programs at university as essential in unseating internalised assumptions of deficit. Rather than segregating First Australian students, participants reported that such programs also worked to bring about greater inter-cultural cohesion within schools and university residential facilities.

At the heart of all the accounts that feature in the chapters that follow is a commitment to authentic, holistic and dialogic relationship.

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, wrote his major work, *I and Thou* (Buber ed. 2000) in Germany during the years immediately following his nation’s defeat in the First World War. It was first published in 1925. This was a time of profound intellectual and social friction and unease in Germany and Buber’s work dealt with the most profound issues of human relations (Morgan 2012). The central tenet of his book is a plea for relationship: an ‘I-Thou’ dynamic that recognises ‘the other’ as a ‘thou’ and not an ‘it’. ‘In the beginning’, he wrote, ‘is the relation’. Relationship as described by Buber recognises and respects the complete personhood and equal dignity of the other person; it gives rise to dialogue that has power to reshape and rebuild community, even in the wake of such horror and disaster as was later occasioned by the Third Reich. An *I-Thou* relationship presupposes mutuality. Two people exist within a common moral sphere, a time and place in history loaded with meaning by the present and the past. Within this paradigm each person has rights and responsibilities. An *I-Thou* relationship assumes that they can dialogue together to determine the best way to make peace with the past, live in the present, and establish hope for the future. Morgan and Guilherme (2012) argue that ‘a community established on dialogue allows for individuals and community to develop
intellectually, ethically, politically, economically and spiritually’ (p993). By contrast, an I-It relationship is marked by objectification of ‘the other’ and this results in the lack of effective dialogue: a being confronts another being and, by objectifying it, fails to recognise it as an equal. In the absence of a dialogic relationship, ‘the other’ becomes a passive object to be governed by those with the power to do so (Said 1977).

Authentic relationship requires an I-Thou dynamic. It presupposes recognition of the whole circumstance of a person’s life. Its dual cornerstones are communication and respect. It is nurtured by a commitment to two-way dialogue and an ethic of care. Authentic relationship precludes the danger of essentialism that underlies many of the constraints described in the chapters in Part 3, and enacts what Noddings (2015) describes as ‘attentive love’ (p10). Such love can only flourish where needs particular to the individual are recognised and attended to. Noddings argues compellingly that institutions such as schools can establish the conditions under which personal caring-for can occur, but that institutions cannot do the caring: for that flesh and blood people are required.

Caring, too, requires dialogue, and dialogue happens between people who meet in a spirit of humility ‘in order to name the world’ (Freire 1993, p69). Dialogue requires that the voices of those conversing be accorded equal weight:

‘Because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another… Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue – loving, humble, and full of faith – did not produce this climate of mutual trust which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in naming of the world’ (Freire 1993, p70).

Data presented here confirm that where relationships are genuine and respectful, where holistic care is provided that pays due attention to the totality of life circumstances, and where humble, hopeful dialogue imagines the ideal and then acts to transform the status quo, otherwise vulnerable individuals are enabled to realise dreams in a way that programs and policy approaches alone could never achieve.

Each of the enabling factors discussed in the chapters that follow find their roots in
authentic relationship. Relationship built on dialogue and reflecting an ethic of care that appreciates the wholeness of the other person’s circumstance. They speak to a generation of families and young people who understand the value of education and are serious in their quest to establish a new and inclusive social order in Australia. They speak to a community of educators whose commitment to making places available for First Australian students in high-performing schools is framed as an exercise in nation building, and mirrored by a collateral commitment to dialogue and authentic relationship.
Chapter 9

Enabling education success through supportive relationships

Section 1: Home based support

A matter that became paramount as I explored the factors enabling academic success with First Australian students, is the relationship between a child and his or her family. One of the strongest enabling factors identified by alumni participants in this study was the support and encouragement they received from parents or grandparents. This is consistent with literature that identifies family support as essential to student transition and engagement at every level of education: from early childhood (SNAICC 2013, Dockett 2010); to secondary (Hill 2009); to tertiary (Wilks 2014). Similarly, the AIEF Compendium (2015) asserts that:

‘In order for any students to be successful at boarding school it is essential that the students’ parents are supportive and active drivers of the decision that the student go to boarding school. Whilst there are some limited examples of students who have succeeded despite a lack of parental support, in those instances there was usually another person driving the decision from the student’s home or community’ (p70).

Despite this consensus, there is very little empirical research that seeks to understand how First Australian families most effectively support their young people in boarding schools, or how schools work to facilitate familial involvement (Stewart 2015, Mander 2015b, Benveniste 2015). Whereas research into the impact of attending boarding school for all students suggests that modern boarding houses enable boarders to remain more connected to important social and psychological assets than may have been the case in the past (Papworth 2014), there is little evidence of whether or to what extent this is the case for First Australian students (Lloyd 2003).

Parent participants in Mander’s (2015b) research were found to be critically aware of the importance of their involvement in their children’s education:
‘It is important to acknowledge that disconnection between home and school can leave Indigenous parents feeling marginalised and ostracised from their child’s educational journey (…). Without exception, all participants recognised the importance of being involved with their children’s educational journey. Moreover, they were highly aware of the risks to their children’s success at boarding school if they became disconnected’ (p4).

Data in the current study confirm the importance of family support in enabling education engagement and achievement. This occurs through student/family relationships that provide purpose and context for a young person’s education efforts, as well as family/school relationships whereby family members advocate for their children within the education system. These findings raise the question of whether boarding schools can make a positive contribution for those young people whose families are unable to play an active role in their education, and if so, how the lack of family involvement might be mitigated.

- Parents shaping purpose and self-concept: the family-student relationship

Every participant spoke of challenges they faced at boarding school; many were acutely aware of their minority status in predominantly non-Indigenous schools, missed home and community, lacked confidence in the classroom and felt socially isolated. In the face of these difficulties, the voices of parents and grandparents played an important role in encouraging them to persevere. Whereas family-school relationships have been identified as a way to ‘close demographic gaps in achievement and maximise students’ potential’ (Hill 2009), the family-student relationship was central to the wellbeing of most alumni who participated in this study, particularly insofar as they continued to affirm their self-worth and longer term benefits of education.
Affirming strength, clarifying purpose

Many participants reported that when they were a long way from home and feeling inadequate at a number of levels, to have someone who knew and loved them encourage a sense of self-worth and purpose was empowering. When asked how he felt about himself in the classroom, one participant responded:

A bit scared.... I’d sit in one corner and just wouldn’t talk. Frightened because there were more white kids than us Indigenous mob, and one thing that kept me going in school was .... the words that my grandfather said to me – be a brave Tiwi person. Don’t shy away from who you are. Let everyone out there know you are a Tiwi person and you are better than you think you are.  

[A9, very remote]

Even young people who felt utterly overwhelmed by boarding school were able to find strength and resilience to persevere with the ongoing encouragement of loved ones. One young woman recalled:

So nearly most nights I’d be calling my granddad saying I want to come home, I want to come home, and he’s saying, look – I really need you to be strong, and be strong for me and our family ‘cause I’m relying on you to lead our people, and I want my granddaughter to have a good education. Like have the [whitefella education].  

[A7, very remote]

It was clear from talking to this young woman that her grandfather’s perspective on the longer-term purpose in her education was of particular importance both during her school years and after she had completed her formal schooling. Like a number of other participants, she used the metaphor of a rock to describe the role her grandfather played in her life. The eulogy that she delivered at his funeral (Figure 6, below) shortly after she had finished Year 12 captured the depth of her reliance on his support:
[For] me, you were my ‘light’. You were the one that I ran to, that would always gently comfort me when I was upset. When we sat together and you spoke to me, you taught me how to see your world and my place in it. You taught me what to see as beautiful and how to celebrate our stories and our connection with the land. You taught me how to retell the stories by teaching me to paint.

You were my ‘protector’ because wherever I travelled, my sense of who I am and my place, were linked to you. During my difficult years at school in [the city], you were never far from my thoughts and I held firmly onto you. And when things were confusing and hard, you were the rock who reminded me of who I am, and you helped me stay true to myself.

It is good that you told me not to worry about the years to come. You told me that you would be helping me as I try to follow in your footsteps. I remember you patted me on the back and told me that I would one day help to look after your country and maintain the culture, as you have done so well. You told me that I was a djungkayi for you.

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Figure 6   Eulogy delivered by Participant A7 at her grandfather’s funeral

This testament to the solidarity she had with her grandfather, which transcended time and space and went to the heart of her identity, captures the essence of how familial support empowered this participant while she was studying away from home. Empathy and constant reaffirmation of a higher purpose gave this young woman strength to endure isolation and deep loneliness. From her speech, it becomes apparent that while a ‘mainstream’ education was important and empowering, it was only part of her education. Not only did her grandfather offer invaluable support in times of crisis or unhappiness, he also made sense of why attending school ‘down south’ mattered and helped her to see that this ‘whitefella education’ could sit comfortably alongside the wealth of traditional knowledge that he had imparted to her over the years.

Whereas schools are sometimes assumed to be the primary locus of education, this grandfather encouraged his granddaughter to see her schooling as only part of the

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18 ‘The word djungkayi is translatable as ‘custodian of cultural knowledge’, ‘ritual manager’, ‘policeman’, ‘boss’. This person is the cultural affairs manager, the person responsible for keeping right the sites, rituals and ceremonies related to culture and caring for country.’ (Schwab 2015)
educative process. Aboriginal commentator Noel Pearson argues that the ‘great vulnerability of Aboriginal people is that the institutions of our culture that mandated seriousness fell apart and have been only partially and inadequately replaced or rejuvenated’ (Pearson 2011a, p13), but this grandfather was firm in his conviction of the relevance of his culture to the modern world. Pearson describes the risk that ‘modern people, secular and unanchored’ will ‘come to feel the double-edged sword of freedom from traditional orthodoxy’ including ‘the freedom to lose one's identity and to assimilate into a dominant culture’ (p14). By contrast this young woman was protected from the loss of her identity and anchored by her grandfather’s reassurance of cultural integrity and belonging. He reminded her of why attending school mattered. Her sense of self and significance were ‘linked’ to him. Through him she was able to construct a consistent narrative of her life (Cohler 1982), even as she moved between worlds. His encouragement made it safe for her to persevere and strive for educational excellence.

To reconsider her reflection through the Bourdieuan lens explained earlier19 is to identify the critical role of the grandfather in helping this young woman reconcile two seemingly incompatible worlds and find her legitimate place in each. Bourdieu would describe the worlds of home and school as two fields, each made up of different forms of capital; of values, practices and ways of being that were dynamic, fluid and often hard to pin down. A field is greater than the sum of its parts, and while there are aspects of the field (institutions, traditions, ideologies) that can be empirically identified, others are intangible. To the ‘insider’, these are taken-for-granted values, approaches, priorities, but to the ‘outsider’ they are mysteries. Bourdieu likens the field to a game that follows rules or ‘patterns of regularities’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, pp97-98). In the school setting that this young woman entered, the field was inscribed with formal rules and traditions, but also comprised the expectations and understandings that parents, alumni and staff amongst others, brought to the institution. Many boarding schools have church affiliations that come with their own ideologies and hers may well have been one of those. Some have a particular tradition of academic, sporting or musical excellence, whereas a social justice or professional achievement agenda drives others. The school in question here would have been no exception and as elsewhere these intangibles would combine to

19 See Chapter 3
define a ‘good life’; one to which she, as a student, would be presumed to aspire although she had received no induction into that way of thinking or being.

Into that space this young woman (A7) arrived, bringing with her a personal history, a set of dispositions inscribed into her very self; what Bourdieu would describe as her *habitus*. This had been shaped and moulded by experience and the social world from which she emerged. The rich vein of human and social capital that she could call on, the spoken and unspoken understanding she shared with her grandfather, the traditional values that circumscribed her life in a very remote community; these *capitals* taken together constituted an alternative field.

The correspondence between these worlds, these ‘*fields*’, was close to nil. Sometimes they were fundamentally at odds. Inevitably this young woman’s ability to ‘read’ the world of the school, and ‘understand the rules of the game’ would have been limited. Bourdieu (1992) hypothesises:

> ‘And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product it is like “a fish in water”: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted’ (p127).

By contrast, encountering a social world other than one’s own leaves a person feeling quite the opposite. To describe this young woman, and others like her, as feeling ‘like a fish out of water’ is apposite.

This young woman’s experience of feeling different to those around her can be explained in sociological terms, whatever cold comfort that might offer a distressed adolescent. In her study of the impact of class on education, Lareau (2001) finds that:

> ‘[When] the habitus of, for example, working-class families confronts the habitus of middle-class teachers, there can be conflicts. Families, particularly working-class families, can feel the weight of the difference of dispositions’ (p85).

For this young woman to be reminded by her grandfather of the greater purpose her educational endeavours were serving, was to be provided with an anchor that would hold fast when everything around her threatened to fall apart. From him she was reassured that
she was able to invest in a western education, but still ‘stay true to [her]self’. By validating the accumulation of modern knowledge from within a traditional epistemological view of the world, her grandfather made clear the purpose of her school-based education. His reassurance that in due course she would return to a place where she would no longer feel the weight of the world on her shoulders during every waking hour, and where she would one day make an important contribution, was a source of solace. Although her subsequent history suggests this ideal was easier said than accomplished, it remains true that her tenure at boarding school was enabled in large part by the wisdom and reassurance of her beloved grandfather.

The experience of this young woman highlights the importance of the older generation understanding the challenges that their offspring face in mainstream institutions. For some, their lack of understanding of these issues also limited their understanding of the support role they would be called upon to play. This was particularly evident in my conversation with a grandfather in one very remote community. When I asked if his grandsons had experienced homesickness when they left home to attend boarding school ‘down south’, he replied:

But really the parents shouldn’t be involved with this at all. I mean they can be still involved, but ... The students should be old enough to look after himself … that’s how it should be…

[P5, very remote]

This old man had never spent extended time in a capital city, but called on his own experience as a member of the Stolen Generations to inform his opinion. By contrast, the young woman above [A7] was one of many participants who reflected on the vital inspiration their parents had given them, albeit not always in as tangible form as her nightly conversations with her grandfather. A number of other participants reported that their parents had ‘pulled them up’ [A8] and helped them see the value of education within the context of their community’s future as well as their own. Where parents themselves had lived difficult lives, the exhortation for children or grandchildren to create a different future for themselves took on an almost spiritual importance that became a spur to embrace every opportunity school presented.
For many young men, parents or grandparents were the ones to challenge the football stereotype sometimes promulgated by schools, but more often internalised by the student. One participant from very remote Australia recalled a conversation with his father shortly after he had been offered a scholarship place in a prestigious southern boarding school. His father was in prison at the time, and the son arranged a visit so that he could convey the good news:

Dad pulled me up... he looked me in the eyes and he said to me, … son, how’s your school going? I remember he was so casual about it, and I started laughing, and I was telling him about all my sports, and I looked at him and I said, oh it’s going okay. And then he said to me, son, you know you have to do well at school because what are you going to do when your sport doesn’t work out for you? And I said, I don’t know. And then he said, you need to have a balance in life, you need to have something to fall back on just because you never know if your rugby or your footy might never work out for you, you know you might be injured or you might be the unlucky one … that doesn’t get chosen for your talents. So I kind of went away, after dad saying that to me, I went away thinking about that.

[A8, very remote]

Before the young man had taken up his position at school the following term, his father had died in custody, and their final conversation was clearly seared into his mind: ‘At the back of my head, every time things got hard at [boarding school], I kept remembering what dad said to me...’.

Far from prioritising his football, it was clear that from the outset, this participant was proactive in making the most of what the school offered and he approached his education with maturity far beyond his years. He recalled attending his very first class at boarding school in Year 10:

I got lost, and I started making my way to the classroom and I apologised to the teacher, and … I remember sitting in the corner, and all these boys looking at me, and I thought to myself – wow! This is real, this is actually happening, and I was
By the time he reached Year 12 this young man had become a respected leader in the school and was elected as a prefect. He completed his final exams and was offered a place at university, but by that time felt the need to return home. Again, it was a parent who ‘pulled him up’ and helped him to see his education journey in a wider frame:

After being down here for almost three years, I remember talking to my mum on the phone, and we had a big talk in mum’s language, and I’d feel as if I was missing out on a lot with my culture... some words I couldn’t quite get out, and ... I felt like I was losing my language, and then mum would correct me and tell me how to say things again, and I needed to go to ceremony, men’s ceremony to learn about the land and everything that comes with it.

In this instance, the school was respectful of the young man’s election to return home in preference to embarking on a course of study at the university where he had been offered a tertiary scholarship. This is in contrast to the experience of a number of other participants who reported feeling pressured by their schools to transition to higher education in the city rather than returning home, even when family were encouraging them to do so.
Parents as advocates: the *family-school* relationship

Beyond inspiring their children to overcome difficulties, or helping them to see how a boarding school education fitted in with their larger life story, some parents also reflected on the role they played as advocates for their children in school. It was in this capacity that many participants identified the *family-school* relationship as paramount.

Consistent with Mander’s (2015b) findings, many parents in this study, and notably those who had had more exposure to mainstream schools, perceived that they had an important role in advocating for their children in the school system. A number reported feeling frustrated that their voices were not given sufficient weight in decision making processes and their ability to advocate was therefore limited. Many reported that schools did not understand or accommodate their wider life circumstances. Asked what they would like to say to schools, many parents picked up on these issues. Several felt that their efficacy was limited by structural inequalities between home and school, and that their interactions with the school were hampered by the lack of recognition of practical barriers First Australian families experienced:

Oh if I could say anything. I’d say involve the families … and make them feel like they’re a part of the experience as well, and not only just on holidays and things like that when the kids are coming home, but through the year …. [Involve us] in a way that’s not fundraising, because … the only sort of stuff that we’ve been invited to is cocktail parties or fundraising kind of things. Oh, there’s been the dinners for the end of the year stuff, but culturally and with respect to just the Aboriginal kids, there’s not a lot of involvement with the school, and I know that that’s probably hard because some of the kids come from the real rural communities, and it might be hard for their parents to get up there …. I think that the schools need to understand that Aboriginal families aren’t always going to have access to the Internet, which they expect us to. You know because you have to do [everything] online… you look at the school reports online, you don’t get sent hard copies of any of this stuff, it’s all online and lots of our families don’t necessarily have computers. So I would like to say that to the schools as well.  

[P20, regional]
As previously illustrated, several families reported feeling marginalised by schools, when staff and management patronised them and failed to respect their right to advocate for their child.

- **Challenges for parents supporting their children.**

Interviews indicated a number of challenges common to participants as they sought to support their children in boarding school. As suggested above, the tyranny of distance and limited Internet connectivity are practical issues that limited the efficacy of parental support. More complex issues to address were structural factors identified by alumni or their parents.

  - Understanding the environment; making informed choices

Lack of understanding of the challenges thrown up by boarding school limited the efficacy of parental support. Many younger participants, and particularly those from remote and very remote communities, reflected that their families did not understand how challenging boarding school was for them. This was corroborated in conversation with parents and also with a number of teachers with experience teaching in both mainstream and remote schools. Some observed that families had ‘no idea’ [T2] what life would be like for their children in large city schools and were therefore not well positioned to support them.

This lack of understanding became apparent in conversation. When a focus group of parents from a very remote community was asked how long their children would need to be away in the city if they wanted to become ‘lawyers or doctors or pilots’, participants suggested that six months or a year should be enough. When I put it to them that entry into Law, Medicine or pathways into the aeronautical industry would require years of intensive study in city centres, they were unanimous that other programs would therefore need to be developed, because that length of time away from community was not feasible. After a discussion between themselves in language, the parents concluded that ‘it’s up to the student to make the decision whether he wants to go for further studies like university, or finish off his apprenticeship or go for diploma or whatever – ... it’s up to the kids, but
there has to be some support from the community leaders, ... to back them up’ [Focus Group, very remote].

When asked if they would send their own children away to school, most alumni participants replied that they would, but only if their child wanted to go. Whereas there was a recurring sense amongst this group that their own parents had no idea about the challenges thrown up by boarding, they were clear that their own experiences at school meant that both they and their offspring would be in a position to make informed choices about whether or not they should leave home. Further, they would be aware of what support young ones would need to enable them to reintegrate when they returned. Consistent with this, a number of second-generation boarders recounted how they had driven the decision to go away to school; that they never experienced pressure from family to do so, or to stay away when things became too hard.

Social class has been touched on insofar as class differences magnified participants’ sense of deficit and acted as a constraint on education outcomes. It is also important to acknowledge the impact class also had on parents’ capacity to prepare their children for boarding school, or to support them during their school years. For a number of participants, their parents’ rationale for sending them away to school, and their understanding of the on-going role they would be expected to play in their children’s lives, were out of step with school expectations and this reflected class as much as it did cultural background. As they progressed to senior years, dissonant aspirations became a source of stress, tension and misunderstanding.

These findings are consistent with the research of Annette Lareau (2011) who investigated the ‘largely invisible but powerful ways that parents’ social class impacts children’s life experiences’ (p3). In particular, her study found that differences involved in child rearing are exacerbated by the ‘uneven distribution of structural resources’ across society (p91). She argues that ‘the key elements of family life cohere to form a cultural logic of child rearing. In other words, the differences among families seem to cluster together in meaningful patterns’. She found that ‘middle class parents tend to adopt a cultural logic of child rearing that stresses the concerted cultivation of children’ (p3).
From this, middle-class children acquire ‘important institutional advantages’ (p4) that ‘appear to lead to the transmission of differential advantages to children’ (p5, italics in the original).

Lareau’s findings help to shine a spotlight on a paradox inherent in the experience of many participants in this study. Generation after generation, middle-class young people emerge from these institutions believing that the world is their oyster, and often they are correct (Finn 2012). The words of one high-end Australian school song (Figure 7) capture the dynamic very succinctly:

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We are [--] collegians all/
    And we rally at the call/
As our fathers and our brothers used to do/
    For we dearly love the name/
    And will ever guard the fame/
Of the school that wears the [- --]

    Good old [--] we shout in chorus/
    As our hearts with ardour glow/
There’s no other school we swear that can with the [--] compare/
    We have looked the whole world over and we know.
      ..... 
    There are men in church and state/
    Men of influence men of weight/
Who regard us with a keen but loving eye/
    And to win the honest praise/
    Of the boys of former days/
    Is a hope which makes/
Our youthful hearts beat high/
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Figure 7  Lyrics to school song
Where schools are founded on the objective of investing students with the same tangible and intangible forms of capital that their ‘fathers and their brothers’ have enjoyed, students from different class and cultural backgrounds are necessarily faced with a dilemma. Their fathers and brothers enjoyed no such privilege. For First Australian students, it is precisely their lack of endowment that has recommended them for a ‘social justice’ place in the school. The moral imagination of the school, at least as embodied in this cultural icon, does not extend to them. Their status as outsiders is confirmed every time the school breaks into song. Beyond what is apparent at school, church and state are identified as complicit in a hierarchy of privilege in which First Australian students appear to have no legitimate place.

And yet it is because of class differentials between First Australian and other school families, that a number of parents wanted their children to attend high-end schools ‘down south’. It was the expectation of a better life ahead that motivated them to send their children away, even at a high emotional cost to themselves. But their awareness of class differences was a double-edged sword: schools were sites of promise, but many families cited class as a factor diminishing their capacity to advocate for their children.

Nevertheless, it remained the case that parental involvement was a key factor for participants achieving positive outcomes from their time at school. As was the case for the young man identified as participant A8 (above), residential scholarship programs for them to attend high-performing schools represented an attempt to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage. This young man’s father, languishing in prison, was supremely aware of the value of education. He wanted his son to enjoy a life that had never been open to him, but it was beyond his power to provide that for his boy. Boarding school was one way to achieve his objective even if, or perhaps precisely because, it was a world away from his prison cell. Although he could not be a physical presence in his son’s life, his role remained central to the young man’s engagement and success, even posthumously. The same was true for a great many participants who reaffirmed that family provided perspective on why their education was important, particularly when they had become ‘lost’ in the challenges presented by boarding school life.
To the extent that data suggest that socio-economic disadvantage, combined with different socio-cultural priorities, prevented parents from actively and effectively supporting their children at boarding school, this highlights the need for schools to take the lead in establishing partnerships between home and school operating as an integrated and effective network of support. The cost to young people of a breakdown in home-school communication, or a failure by schools to create a healthy dialogic relationship in the first place, was responsible for derailing the education endeavours of a number of participants in this study.

- Parents’ lack of trust

In addition to social class, research in America has found that parent or guardians’ own poor experience of school and their experience of discrimination and bias within the education system has resulted in a mistrust of school by many African-American parents (Ogbu 2003, Lareau 1987). In the Australian setting, parental awareness of the colonial legacy has acted as a potent constraint to parents actively engaging with their children’s schools (Herbet 2000). Consistent with this, several participants reported that parents’ lack of support reflected their own racial bias:

So growing up ... my Nan, and it sort of rubbed off on my mum, had a thing about non Indigenous people where you know she didn’t like ... my mum didn’t like me accepting things from you know non Indigenous people, being told what to do...

[A32, regional]

In this case, the distrust for all things ‘white’ which ran deep in both mother and grandmother left this young man isolated and ultimately confused by his time at boarding school. Unlike the young man featured above (A7), no one was able to help him make sense of the void that existed between the two hemispheres of his life. As he moved between dissonant worlds, he, like many others interviewed, did so alone. Although the school had offered to bring his family to the city and put them up in a motel as a way of alleviating his homesickness, they never did so. Perhaps telling of the asymmetry of power between home and school, no staff member had ever visited his home or community in person; all communication took place through the agency of a (non Indigenous) mentor in his home community. This meant that the mother had very little
direct contact with the school and the lack of an affective relationship only added to her growing fear that her boy was being sucked inexorably away from her.

Given the power imbalance between high-performing schools and most First Australian families, data indicate that the responsibility for establishing and maintaining open lines of communication between staff and families should rest on schools. This finding has implications for schools, and particularly for the staffing of Indigenous programs.

A small number of participants in this study are currently, or have at some stage been, responsible for running the Indigenous program in a school or university residential college. These people confirm the central role that parents play in empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and the implications that has for staff. In the words of one:

| I said [to] the principal, … don’t ever sit there and think you can pat yourself on the back because we’ve got this amazing program … If the community say we don’t like what [boarding school] are doing … we’re out of business, so for us it was absolutely about the parent buy in, and in fact I wouldn’t be able to do what I do without parental support because they got the kids back on those planes every holidays. They got them on the buses... they’re the ones that said you’re going back to [boarding school] because they believed in the program. And so I think this whole idea … about kids not coming back to school, that’s only because you haven’t built enough relationship with the parents to get them to work with you. I can’t get kids back from community to [boarding school]. I don’t [have what it takes to] put them on the buses, trains, planes. So it’s really important that I was actually friends with all the boys’ parents and had a really good relationship with them, and I would work my butt [off] for that and ring them and send them the newsletters and spend time with them when they came to [capital city] because you’re defeating the whole purpose of your program if you don’t build your relationships with the community and the parents as fundamentally number one. |

This participant moved from the secondary school to tertiary sector when it became
apparent that students who had succeeded at boarding school were dropping out of university within the first six months, citing a lack of cultural support and understanding. Again, she identified building relationships with families as critical to establishing a successful program:

So my relationship with the students and their families begins before they arrive. So it’s me visiting them in their home community. It’s getting to know me … So it started by ringing the mums and saying I’ve got their backs, I’m the person to go to 24/7. So really I start building the bridge and that cultural bridge way before they even start uni. So it’s really December, January, February I’m already talking to Year 12s this year who are coming next year. So that’s really important.

[T5]

At the time of being interviewed, this participant was overseeing a cohort of more than fifty students from urban, regional, remote and very remote communities who were achieving outcomes commensurate with their non-Indigenous peers in a range of under and post-graduate university degree courses. Her approach will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 11.

Where there is no parental support

Identifying parental involvement as a necessary prerequisite to success at boarding school begs the question of whether opportunities are therefore limited or curtailed altogether for young people whose parents or extended families are not in a position to support them. More generally it raises the question of how boarding schools satisfy an ethic of care for young people when there is no one at home able to proactively partner with the school in doing so. For these young people the paradox described above is particularly acute.

As revealed in Chapter 5, one of the reasons cited for young people being sent away to boarding school was to avoid problematic situations in home communities. For a number of alumni participants these included problems within their family of origin. Many grandparents, and particularly those from remote and very remote communities, were concerned about shortcomings in how the younger generation were parenting their own
children. They identified patterns of behaviour that would render some parents unlikely or unable to be proactive in supporting or advocating for children in boarding schools.

A number of alumni described growing up in homes where their parents did not have the resources to support them at school, emotionally or educationally, and they were grateful that school had facilitated a life that they would otherwise never have known. Each reported that they had been selected for a scholarship on the recommendation of a teacher or their primary school principal. Many described boarding school as providing an experience of care and targeted support that their parents were not in a position to give. Arguably boarding school was more important in re-shaping their lives than it was for participants who came from homes where parents were more invested in schooling. This was the case whether or not they finished school or progressed to higher education. Their reflections on how boarding school reshaped their future and equipped them to realise their dreams challenge the presumption that family support is an essential prerequisite for Indigenous students in boarding schools. They also emphasise how exclusively statistical measures of ‘success’ provide an inadequate framework for understanding the role boarding school played in shaping their adult lives.

For some young people the benefits of boarding were hard won, and became apparent only in hindsight. In the short term, being away from home with no family support created tensions and complexities that had serious implications for their mental health. Data indicate that in many cases schools were unaware of the gravity of the internal turmoil participants experienced at school. A number were clearly mismanaged by staff and this suggests that more professional development is needed for any staff working with trauma affected First Australian young people. Inevitably the question of how to provide adequate and holistic care arises for these young people.

A case in point is that of the young man identified as A32 whose story features at various points in previous chapters and above. At the time of being interviewed this young man reported that he had recently been diagnosed with depression, but that symptoms had begun when he was in Year 8, a year after starting at boarding school. Realising that he needed holistic support that was not forthcoming from home, staff identified a family from the school community willing to welcome him into their home and so provide some respite from the boarding house during weekends in term time. The mother went to great
lengths in caring for him, but this became a source of conflict with his own family. She had been given no cultural awareness training, and clearly did not understand the primacy of family to his wellbeing. She saw dysfunction, but not the role they played in framing his identity. For all her kindness, she was actively unhelpful in the young man being able to reconcile the different parts of his life:

And I’m not saying [guardian] was bad … or that she had bad intentions, but there’d be times where she wouldn’t even want me to go home. She’d be like stay here with us, you know it’s good for you down here … I didn’t like that because ... I did miss my family, and I know that my family’s not perfect, no family’s perfect. But it’s like she didn’t want me to be a part of that anymore…. It was because she didn’t understand … she saw a life for me that I didn’t see, and she wanted me to live only that life. She didn’t accept the way my life already was, and I still don’t think she does accept it, and she can’t understand it, but I mean it’s just growing up in two different ways.

[A32, regional]

His words suggest that the guardian, and potentially the school as well, saw assimilation as the only way to ‘save’ him, and this required that he minimise his association with home. By contrast he was determined to remain steadfast in his responsibility as the ‘rock’ and the ‘man’ of his family even though, as he grew older, he became more and more confused by the dissonance between his home life and the life he experienced in the city. When he dropped out of school mid-way through Year 12 in order to protect his mother from domestic violence, he felt that he had failed everyone who had ever invested in him. This feeling was exacerbated when the scholarship provider and the school ceased to maintain contact with him, and (he felt) made no effort to help him transition to the high school in his local community so that he could attain his Year 12 certificate.

Despite all of these problems, this young man was aware that his time at school would have a long-term beneficial impact on his life:

I’m trying to implement a new lifestyle for my mum … my mum doesn’t understand and I don’t think she’s going to understand for a while... I’ll just explain. My mum lives in a house where she ... how can I explain it? My brothers...
and sisters don’t have good clothes. My brothers and sisters don’t have good bed linen. My brothers and sisters don’t have much dishes. You know, but I’d never say any of this to my mum ‘cause it would make her feel like shit you know, but the way my mum lives, she accepts the way she lives because that’s just the way she was brought up, but going away to boarding school, and seeing how other people live their lives compared to how my mum lives hers and how I’ve lived my life my whole life, … it’s been able to open my eyes to how Indigenous people don’t have to live within a stereotype of how other Indigenous live, and that’s how it is…. When I try and tell her … mum buy food … stop fuckin’ wasting your money on drugs.... and go get yourself clothes and go and get the kids clothes [sigh] … She says to me … this is who I am … This is how I live, and if you can’t accept it, then don’t be a part of my life … [I say to her] you know I’m not trying to change you, I’m not trying to tell you what to do, I just want a better life than what you had and what I had growing up, and my brothers and sisters.

His account supports claims that boarding schools have a role to play in the wider enterprise of recalibrating social norms in dysfunctional communities, but also emphasises the necessity for strong cultural awareness in school staff and any other people who work with First Australian boarding school students.

Caring in such situations requires a willingness to go beyond, and to meet the young person and their family at their points of need. This has implications not only for communication, but also for the substance of what is taught (and understood by staff). To learn about the colonial legacy he had inherited, which here included some of Australia’s most brutal frontier encounters and the full-scale implementation of child removal policies (Flyn 2016, Haebich 2000), would have helped to contextualise his life circumstances. In addition to understanding the past, present and future life demands suggested that for many participants practical issues needed to be addressed. Financial literacy was clearly an issue for the young man, for others, sex education and building their capacity as parents should have been important priorities.
One teacher participant had important insight into how some current programs fall short in this regard:

The Indigenous students are a very, very small minority at the school; they are very much an add-on, and a sort of a special case… almost treated at best as a bit of charity case … The school itself has a long history of day and boarder students, and the Indigenous students are a recent addition. [It] had begun as an informal arrangement, … and that then it switched to being a little more of a formalised agreement through scholarship foundations, but the students almost operated under the radar a bit. I look back and I feel that in my first few years there I wasn’t really aware who the Indigenous students were or how they fitted in, ... certainly at induction I don’t remember being told about them … I really had no consciousness of them ... all of them were supported by [mentor] and a couple of other staff at the school, but they were very much expected to get on with it. I ended up having a couple of them in my class in successive years, and it really came down to … attempting to place them with people who were seen as compassionate or helpful teachers, but there was absolutely no sense that ... teachers who were going to have these boys would be given any sort of special training or PD in helping them. At that time, I was quite ignorant beyond just being generally left wing and aware of Australia’s history. I was quite ignorant about things like whether they spoke Aboriginal English at home or standard English, their background, their different amount of cultural awareness each boy had – I was quite unaware of those sort of things, and certainly didn’t particularly take that into account to begin with, and most of my knowledge was more just compassion for them on a case by case basis, about being an outsider, being somebody who perhaps hadn’t had the same sort of school background that the rest of the [boarding school] boys had had.

Her reflection accords with that of a number of other teacher participants from large urban schools. She reflected that having completed teacher training some years earlier she had not been exposed to learning about Indigenous Australia at university. Further, she expressed concern that scholarship providers are inactive in addressing the dearth of
cultural awareness in their partner schools: ‘these scholarship foundations, the management are sort of taking on these kids, but without necessarily the structure and the knowledge to go with it’ [T2]. Lack of cultural awareness amongst staff is a double burden for young people who have no one able to advocate for them in the system.

Having affective dialogic relationships with parents, even in cases where they are unable to actively support their children while they are away from home, is both achievable and mutually beneficial. T2 intuitively understood the need to work with the families of her students, even when others did not make this a priority:

I think a lot of people had the impression that these kids came from difficult or underprivileged backgrounds, and teachers certainly wouldn’t have necessarily known how involved the parents were or what the parents’ relationship was with the child, and I know with [student]’s family … I’d invited them up to sports day, there was a lot of – oh gosh, is it going to be okay? Are they going to be intimidated? And yet they came along...

[T2]

Her words again emphasise the value of staff professional development aimed at breaking down barriers, and giving people the confidence to engage with First Australian families.

- Creating dialogic spaces

Where schools commit to relationship, even where this is made difficult by family circumstance, data indicate that all parties benefit. The testimony of A28, a young man part-way through an undergraduate degree at university at the time of being interviewed, provides a useful insight into the way boarding school shaped his adult life, notwithstanding a lack of parental involvement. His early life experience is in many ways analogous with that of the young man above [A32], but he suffered none of the same distress from leaving home to attend school. Neither did his parents experience the distress of feeling that their child was lost to them because he had gone away to school. The difference was that in this case the school was absolutely committed to empowering the young man’s parents to fulfil their parental role even in the face of major family disruption.
By any measure, this participant [A28] had a difficult home life. Both of his parents grew up in out-of-home care, his father as a member of the Stolen Generations. Of his early years, he recalled:

I was in mum’s custody at the time ... I guess I’d say I have a bit of a disadvantaged family, like mum having five kids, unemployed, it was really tough on her ... she used to be an alcoholic, and it wasn’t really a good situation. Two of her children, … my brothers, they were dependent on drugs and alcoholism, and mum being an alcoholic, she just really couldn’t take all the drama and all that stress, and like looking after five kids … it would have been really hard on her, and she pretty much used alcohol to deal with those problems.

[A28, urban]

At age 16, the Supreme Court convicted one of his two brothers to ‘six or seven’ years in jail and since that time he has been caught in a vortex of addiction and crime. Of his brother the young man reflected, ‘he will never be the same, like he’ll never be that innocent person’.

At a given point, his mother could no longer cope and he went to live with his father. This man had been taken from his own family at age three and spent the next ‘sixteen to eighteen years’ living on a church mission (Figure 8). There he had suffered physical and sexual abuse for which he later received monetary compensation but no sense of closure. His son concluded:

His life was pretty much screwed over I guess. [Dad had] a very disadvantaged life …. [The] only people who he could really rely on was his friends he grew up with … Many people who tried to escape from camps, like you got like a really bad punishment if they caught you. My dad, he decided well I don’t want to get punished, so I might as well just do all this until I get out. He had to get out somehow anyway one day… So my dad really didn’t have a family when he was growing up.

[A28, urban]
At the time of conducting the interview, his father had returned to the mission in a caretaker capacity. His son explained this saying:

He … gets a bit of history just by visiting there, just by feeling that vibe, just by reliving I guess, even though that place is a lot more better now … you still feel that bad vibe, but … it’s improving. He still goes back there because it’s... I guess it is, as bad as it sounds, it is part of his history.

Figure 8 Church mission home

Never having experienced family life, his father was at a major disadvantage in parenting his own children. When the opportunity presented itself for his youngest son to take up residence in a boarding school, both parents and the young man saw it as an opportunity, although neither mother nor father were in a position to offer any practical or on-going support.

For this young man, boarding school came to represent ‘freedom’ and right from the start he was deeply appreciative:

I’d never experienced life like that. My life growing up was completely different to what my life was at college. Like it was like a different life, I was living a double life I guess in a way. I still see my mum on weekends and stuff, but ...
[boarding school] helped me in a way that it put me on the right path ... it pretty much gave me a life and taught me that you know you’ve had this amazing experience, and me, being very appreciative, makes me want to do more. It never actually put me back, it pulled me towards my future goals and everything. So I don’t know, I feel like I appreciated it more than all the other students.

He described being determined ‘to be successful’, saying ‘I want to be someone my family hasn’t been yet’. When asked what message he would like to give schools he replied:

So the thing I would say to a boarding school is just continue being a boarding school, just continue what you’re doing because for a person like myself who didn’t have a great life growing up, and going to a boarding school which completely changed me for the best … I have so many opportunities now and I’m living a great life. You know I’m having a good life. So for a boarding house, it’s for the best for someone, and people never really know how much it can actually change someone’s life … for the best.

On the day of our interview, this young man was returning to his university residential college for the first day of the new academic year. As we walked down the corridor together, he flung his arms wide and repeated ‘Here I feel free’. His words and his actions powerfully affirmed the care that he had received both at boarding school and at his tertiary residential college, notwithstanding his parents’ lack of capacity to support him. Grounded through a culturally supportive and affirming program, with staff committed to dialogue and to meeting both the student and his parents at their point of need, this student was enabled to flourish. He told me that he aspired to complete his undergraduate degree and move on to Masters level study. When I asked him what he thought life would be like had he never gone away to school he replied:

That place changed me, … if I never went to [boarding school] ... I’d probably be like my brothers, to be honest. I feel like if I never went to [boarding school] I would have chosen the path they did, ‘cause I would have felt like oh well, what’s the point, you’re going to be at home every single day, and I would have adapted
to that life more… So [boarding school] was probably the best thing for me, it really was, like it helped me choose the right path too ... You’ve got like the highest school education ... It was a whole new world, it was a whole new world. Yeah, and it was really good. I’m really proud that I went there.

This account debunks the claim that young people cannot succeed at boarding school without active parental support, however desirable that support may be. It also speaks to the commitment that First Australian families have to education even when their past has left them too damaged to participate as active partners on the journey. The director of the Indigenous program in this case was as close to this young man’s father as to any other parent at the school [private conversation, T5]. When he was awarded compensation for the abuse he had suffered as a child she understood the internal turmoil that occasioned for him and was compassionate in her response. The school appreciated and celebrated the young man’s achievements all the more because they understood the hurdles that he had overcome along the way. It understood the centrality of his cultural identity and forged strong bonds with the local Aboriginal community to ensure that the holistic support he needed was anchored within an appropriate cultural frame.

Martha Nussbaum (2010) argues that when we meet ‘the other’ in society, and fail to imagine in them the same capacity for thought and emotion as we recognise in ourselves,

‘democracy is bound to fail, because democracy is built upon respect and concern, and these in turn are built upon the ability to see other people as human beings, and not simply as objects’ (p6).

In this participant’s experience, the ethic of care he encountered first at boarding school and then at university ‘saw’ him in the totality of his life circumstance. Far from undermining his education endeavours as was the case for the young man identified as A32 (above) whose home situation was analogous, this participant experienced a continuity of life and education experience that affirmed him at every level. Although he came and went from a dysfunctional home situation throughout his whole education experience, this was not a bar to engagement or ‘success’. Indeed, the continuity of experience led him through an educative process that Dewey (1965) describes as
recognising the organic connection between education and personal experience. This leads to growth that is most correctly understood, Dewey argues, when described ‘in terms of the active participle, growing (p36). Similarly, research into youth mental health affirms the centrality of young people being able to construct a consistent narrative of life and this participant’s experience points to the school’s role in facilitating that.
Section 2: School based support

One of the potential benefits of attending high performing, high expectation boarding schools is the capacity for those institutions to provide holistic support that meets the social, emotional and educational needs of students (Doyle & Hill 2008). Because boarding school entails living in a controlled residential program 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for 40 weeks a year, students are provided with a wide range of supports and both structured and unstructured activities that go well beyond those able to be provided by day schools (Benveniste 2015, AIEF 2015). In addition to these supports, participants in this study described benefitting from studying alongside highly motivated peers who aspired to go on to university. For many, being surrounded by academically oriented students made them more aware of post-school possibilities and many reported growing more confident to pursue wider horizons.

In her investigation into the extent to which boarding schools increase students’ exposure to social, cultural, and education capital, Bass (2014) defines boarding school culture as including ‘classes, meal times, study times, intramural sports, clubs, tutorials, extracurricular activities, and social time with peers and dorm parents’ (p17).

Further, and consistent with literature on peer effect (Kiss 2013, Lavy 2011, Imberman 2012, Vardardottir, 2013), the AIEF Compendium (2015) claims that as students interact with staff and students from other backgrounds ‘intellectually, emotionally, socially, politically and spiritually’, in an environment away from home, new learning is generated that would not be possible through other modes of education (p20).

Peer effect

Literature confirms the value of young people crossing the class divide. It establishes that peer effect can be positive (where peers influence learning by helping, tutoring, friendship, providing emotional support), or negative (where low classroom peer acceptance is consistently linked to student disengagement) (Hattie 2009, p105). In addition to formalised support structures, the impact of studying in schools where fellow students are likely to come from highly educated families is also significant (Kiss 2013, Kenway 2014, Imberman 2012).
In line with other studies, Marginson (2015) estimates that a young person in Australia is 4.3 times more likely to participate in tertiary education if one of their parents was tertiary-educated than a young person whose parents had less than upper secondary education. The rationale for sending disadvantaged young people to high-performing middle class boarding schools is an attempt to break the nexus between socio-educational disadvantage and poor levels of educational attainment. That this approach is efficacious for some students is suggested by the experience of participants in this study: only three had a parent who was tertiary educated, but 19 had gone on to enroll at university themselves, although several dropped out within the first two years of their course. This is consistent with the findings of the NCVER report into the intergenerational mobility between parents’ socio-economic status and their children’s socio-economic status. Researchers in that study found that the role of parents’ socio-economic status is being gradually replaced over time by school socio-economic status as a strong indicator of children’s academic outcomes (Redmond 2014, p13).

Targeted institutional support: a determinant of success or a source of stigma?

In line with youth development literature, which establishes that supports and activities such as those described here produce positive outcomes for young people generally (Marsh 1997, 2008), most participants in this study described the academic and social support they received at school as beneficial. This was particularly the case where extra support grew out of genuine and caring relationships. Where extra supports were unsolicited, or focussed exclusively on academic needs, or worse, racially based assumptions of academic need, many participants reported feeling embarrassed or stigmatised. Some actively resisted the help that was offered even though they acknowledged that they would have benefitted from it. This is consistent with literature relating to institutional support offered in higher education settings (Pechenkina 2014, Nakata et al. 2008, Foley 1996, Page & Asmar 2008).

Pechenkina (2015) conducted a study of Indigenous students’ perceptions of institutional support at an Australian university. She found that as a result of institutional support structures being built to respond to the presumed needs of Indigenous students, the attitudes and behaviours of staff members may also be shaped by an understanding that all Indigenous students are in need of support, regardless of their personal circumstances.
and differences. The way Indigenous students in her study perceived support was influenced by a number of factors: their expectations of support; whether support was solicited by them or not; and the manner in which support was delivered. Some ‘positively valued’ support encounters. Others did not need extra help, but appreciated the offer of support, understanding it was a ‘symbol’ of the university’s commitment to an Indigenous achievement agenda. A third group perceived support as ‘stigmatising’. These participants were usually those approached with unsolicited offers of support based on their indigeneity. Data in the present study indicate that this tripartite typology of Indigenous support perceptions is also apposite to students in boarding schools. This has not been described previously in literature relating to boarding schools in Australia.

- Positively valued support

Many participants remembered feeling daunted by the academic standard they encountered at boarding school, and personalised tutoring was a source of encouragement for them. For young people who had been accustomed to being at the top of their class, coming into a learning environment where they felt inadequate was confronting.

At [local school], I was ... in the top five students in my year level, and I guess because of that ... knowing that I was smart … in that environment made me continue to keep ... trying to keep the same grade. And then when coming to [capital city] ... because there are so many intelligent people at that school, … you’re a bit quieter in the classroom kind of thing.

[A15, remote]

Most were grateful for the extra support they received at boarding school and a number of young people and their parents were at pains to emphasise that this should be clearly recorded. Several claimed that their lives today look very different to what they would have been had they not received the high level of holistic care that was organised for them by school staff. This was not limited to support at school although several accounts speak to the commitment of dedicated teachers who went well above and beyond their normal terms of employment in order to meet the particular needs of participants:
I became really close with the teachers, which was a huge... it just made all the difference … I’d spend a lot of my weekends and stuff with teachers ... just catching up because it was completely different, like the amount of homework set, and I was quite behind. So from being kind of on top at [local school] to pretty behind at [boarding school] was definitely a challenge, but I had a really good relationship with my teachers, and they really, really helped and gave extra time to me.

[A12, remote]

Others reflected on the quality of teachers they encountered in boarding school and expressed appreciation for the education they had received. Although they had not received targeted support as Indigenous scholars, they cited the personalised nature of teaching as making a profound impression on them:

Biology was my favourite subject, and I actually had a connection with my Biology teacher that I didn’t really have with any other teachers, that’s kind of what pushed me to go into Indigenous health and to do medicine.  

[A21, urban]

These participants recognised that their education had impacted not only their short- or medium-term academic outcomes but also their longer-term life skills and choices. Of the tertiary students or graduates in this study, many reflected on the expanded world view they took away from school, and their increased confidence and sense of entitlement to grasp opportunities. In this, several cited the influence of a single teacher or mentor who encouraged them to strive for excellence. In this, the teachers who consistently worked from a strengths base, and who empowered participants to do the same were cited as transformative. The young woman [A21] above described the approach of her science teacher, who forewarned her when Indigenous issues were to be raised in class:

He was talking about Indigenous health … and before the class he came up to me and said, oh, I’m going to talk about this … how do you feel about it …? And I was like, yeah that’s cool and we’d talk about it, … and then he sort of said, that’s right, [A21] isn’t it? And I was like yeah … He did it in a way that was really positive for me, as if it was … that’s cool that I know that, rather than it being ooh, you’re part of that group that’s really not well off, and is going through a lot
of hardship. It was … a really positive way to do it… he’s probably the main reason that I strived for medicine.

[A21, urban]

Although most participants in this study graduated school in the last 10-15 years, several finished school some time ago and their accounts provide a longer-term perspective on the impact of attending boarding school. While the descriptions of the (lack of) pastoral care they received hopefully reflect standards of a bygone era, their reflections on the academic support have much in common with contemporary accounts. Again, it was the personalised nature of care that made all the difference. One such participant, who attended a Catholic boarding school some decades ago, remembered his English Literature teacher:

I still regard him as the best teacher I’ve ever had because he sort of embedded individuals in the teaching … he taught in a way that was relevant to you… He wasn’t esoteric or philosophical or theoretical, although it was all of those things, but you felt like in his class he was circling you with the new knowledge, not the whole class, and I still regard him as the best teacher I’ve had… I got a first class honour in English literature in Year 12. It was that sort of analysing Shakespeare for example, you know learning by heart bloody Coleridge… and those things stick with you throughout your life, and it’s wonderful literature about life … They made you think and rationalise about world events because they were on the curriculum, and then they talked about it and asked you to think about it.

[A35, remote]

His reflection describes best practice for teaching any student. This participant particularly appreciated the commitment priests had to building all students’ capacity to reason, and recognised that as the foundation for his subsequent academic success:

The Catholic priests … they were big on rationality and the thinking individual who could reason. They weren’t into bloody rote learning or direct instruction, that bullshit. They were teaching kids to rationalise their environment, their
surrounds, their community, their society, their nation, and the world. Yeah we
did a lot of real studies in just about everything. That was the nature of the priests
really who were pretty well educated themselves and had a world view about
things. I mean I’ve no regrets about the education, it was a wonderful education.

Although there were many aspects of boarding school life that he did not endorse, and
though he was adamant that place-based education options are essential for most young
people, his testimony speaks clearly to the role of the school in reshaping his self-concept
and life choices. Like a number of other participants, he chose to attend boarding school
‘because I just didn’t like my home life and I wanted to be out of that’. He had not thought
a great deal of life beyond school and reflected that he had ‘no bloody idea’ what he was
signing up for when he elected to leave home, but as he progressed, his understanding of
the world and his place in it evolved:

I felt I was just another kid going through school, and there was no plan, there
was no objective, I was going to do Year 10 and go and do a motor mechanic’s
apprenticeship, and that was the year I topped my class [laugh] and I changed my
mind… I should have a go at Year 11…

This man was an outstanding scholar, an accomplished athlete and a natural leader and
the school’s expectations for him reflected this. He did not describe needing or receiving
extra academic support, although he reflected at length on the social and emotional
support of his peers:

When there were people who were racial sledging me and they’d stand up for me
and I’d stand up for them, and they’re the blokes that became lifetime friends…
I’m still in contact with those guys, I see them on a regular basis, and you know
they’re just bloody really decent men.

Support from these friends would more correctly be described as *fellowship* and the
relationships that sustained him as a boy continue to enrich his adult life. About the recent
death of one of his schoolmates he reflected ‘he died two years ago and it left a big hole,
a hole in my life you know’. As one of only two Indigenous students in his school, over
the secondary years he developed a wide and enduring friendship group that crossed cultural boundaries. This was in contrast to younger participants, most of whom reported staying in contact predominantly, often exclusively, with other First Australian students.

Stigmatising support

Although participants spoke about receiving a range of supports at school, and organised by the school, those which participants identified as most effective all emanated from close and respectful relationships. They were appropriate and holistic supports that grew organically or were intentionally put in place to meet the real needs of the individual. By contrast, some participants described feeling disempowered by ‘support’ that reflected a racially essentialised perception of need.

A number of alumni reported that extra academic assistance was foisted on them, whether they requested it or not. They resented the lack of control they had over what supports were provided, when, and by whom. A number reported that they were assumed to require extra help based purely on their aboriginality notwithstanding they, like A35 above, were performing close to the top of their cohort. For several young people, racialised assumptions of academic need saw them assigned to classes for low achieving students from which in most cases they were later elevated. This meant that they were not challenged in class and any increase that might have accrued to their own academic performance from studying alongside high achieving peers was foreclosed (Vardardottir 2013). For some participants, this evoked a determination to succeed independent of any external help. Several of these young people regretted this in retrospect, and acknowledged that there had been moments when extra tutoring could have expedited their educational success.

Not all participants were as robust. Consistent with Pechenkina’s (2016) findings, defiance was often expressed in ways that were more self-defeating than aspirational. In a private conversation one young man described ‘shutting down’ after a series of incidents at school where he felt that his voice was ignored or actively silenced. He recounted a confrontation he had with a tutor who had been organised on his behalf, notwithstanding his insistence that he needed to complete a practice exam in preparation for an important

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20 See for example the anecdotes recounted in Chapter 7.3
piece of assessment the following day. Although he acknowledged that generally ‘I needed [extra tutoring] or I would have been behind’, he resented the fact that a staff member ‘tried to run everything you know, sort of tell us what to do’. At one level his account of a particular moment of crisis was almost farcical:

She sits down at my doorstep to the room, and she goes, oh no, I can sit here on the laptop until you’re ready to do Art. So she wouldn’t give me my work back so I could do the practice test. So I threw my art book at her and said, here do the Art then if you want to do Art. And I swore at her and everything... threatened to hit her with one of the sticks in my room you know [laugh].

By contrast he recalled how arrangements were made with his tutor for Environmental Science:

He would text us in the morning of school, and he’d be like, I’m coming in tonight if you boys need a hand, and if not, just let me know and we’ll discuss it for another night … Or we’d text him – are you free tonight, can you come in because we’ve got a test coming up or something, and he’d come in.

The direct correlation between his sense of agency and his attitude to the tutoring he received brought about quite different outcomes, and points again to the primacy of respectful dialogic relationship.

- Support leading to learned helplessness

A number of participants observed that either for themselves, for classmates or for family members, the amount of extra help offered by the school combined with underlying issues to create learned helplessness. While almost all interviewees identified an increased sense of independence as a great benefit of attending boarding school, very often this did not equate with seeing themselves as independent learners or effective agents in their own lives. They could confidently find their way around the city by themselves, but were less likely to be able to write an essay or make independent life decisions without help. Although they graduated from Year 12, these young people reported that they felt
unprepared for the demands of higher education and dropped out in the first year of their tertiary course.

Several interviewees reflected on why they had been passive in their own education journey. A number claimed that their progression through school and on to university was driven by what others expected, rather than their own active choices and ambitions. In the words of one young man ‘everything was hand given at [boarding school]’. This participant described being ‘forced to go to uni... because [he] had the ability’ and also because it was good for the school’s PR machine. He asserted that: ‘it will look good that I just left [boarding school] and got to ... like the best college in Australia’ [A1, very remote]. He admitted that having transitioned to university, his own lack of volition became apparent, even to himself. Once he realised that no one was going to do things for him, he ‘didn’t have … the willpower and... as soon as I found out that if I didn’t have to go, like no-one would tell me to go or wake me up, I didn’t go’ [A1, very remote].

This young man made recurring reference to the lack of connection between his home and city lives and he questioned the usefulness of tertiary study within the wider frame of his life situation. He was clearly struggling to reconcile divergent cultural experiences, expectations and epicurean tastes. Redolent of Bourdieu’s (1973) thesis that schools are effective mechanisms for social and cultural reproduction, he confessed that being away at school ‘changes the way you live, what I eat, sleep, work ... it changes’. There was no suggestion that his lassitude reflected personal laziness: on the contrary, at the time he was interviewed, he was in a full-time job and having no other transport, walked eight kilometres at the beginning and end of each working day. He was paying rent, playing competitive football and spent all his spare time producing artworks.

By contrast, other participants identified a connection between learned helplessness and an underlying belief in their own inadequacy. One highly motivated and dynamic young woman, who ascribed her work ethic to the example set by her mother, reflected on other members of her extended family:

I can see it when I would talk to my cousin that she just was so used to having someone to tell her to just go and do it … And I did that to her a couple of times as well. You know she’d constantly ask me questions, and I’m like – you know
the answer, like you just need to concentrate … stop saying that you’re dumb, because you’re not, and I think that’s something that indigenous kids really struggle is when they can’t work something out, they just continue to tell themselves that they can’t do it. And then you sort of get stuck in that.

This again highlights the primacy of honest and open dialogic relationships between schools, students, parents and scholarship providers, to ensure that the objectives being sought through a boarding school education are consistent and responsive to the needs of young people, their families and communities.

Support and gender

Biddle & Meehl (2016) conducted a quantitative study of the gendered nature of Indigenous education participation and attainment in Australia. They explored the reasons for the disparities between male and female First Australian education achievement, particularly at the high-school level and found that overall, First Australian females are more likely to achieve higher test scores than their male counterparts, are more likely to attend school and more likely to complete Year 12 (p11). They concluded that within the First Australian population, males and females are achieving different educational outcomes and that men and women require support in different areas to improve their educational outcomes overall (p11).

The participants in this study comprised slightly more males than females and there was no marked difference in school attendance or attainment. One contrast between the testimonies of young men and young women was that the former were much more likely to have benefitted from positive peer relationships, typically forged in the sporting arena. By contrast, many girls reported feeling excluded or misunderstood at school, and once they left they were more likely to have only stayed in contact with other First Australian students, or occasionally with international students. A wider scale study would be required to generalise this finding across the wider population of First Australian boarders.
Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the nature of support participants described as empowering during their time at boarding school. Where families and schools worked together to support students, participants reported that they were able to surmount otherwise major obstacles to education success. In situations where schools worked to empower parents who were otherwise unable or unaware of how to offer the supports their child needed in the unfamiliar school environment, participants reported a three-way benefit accruing to student, school and family. By contrast, where schools or families failed to work from a position of mutual respect to enact an integrated network between home and school, alumni participants reported that their education outcomes, and their social and emotional wellbeing all suffered.

The issue of in-school support, either academic or social and emotional, reflected a similar dynamic. Most participants reported being grateful for the extra academic support they received through boarding, but where support was foisted upon them on the assumption of need, they reported feeling disempowered. Whereas some responded by rejecting all help, others became passive in relation to their own learning and life needs.

The next chapter presents evidence to illustrate the transformative power of strengths-based approaches to education. It presents two case studies to illustrate how eschewing deficit thinking and enacting culturally respectful curriculum, pedagogy and practice worked to transform the education experience of these participants.
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Chapter 10

Positive, proactive and agentic: Students and systems working to challenge deficit mindsets

‘The initial educational struggle for Indigenous educators, then, has been to sensitize the Eurocentric consciousness in general, and educators in particular, to the colonial and neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalize and racialize Indigenous students. This does not come easily to Eurocentric-educated White people, for it requires their unlearning as well-challenging their meritocracy and superiority myths to learn how their privileges were constructed and maintained in a racist society’ (Battiste, 2010).

‘Today our young people are increasingly likely to miss out on their cultural education that directly affects their connection to country. There is a clear imbalance between efforts to provide a westernised education, and access to traditional cultural knowledge. Learning how to live on country and having access to traditional knowledge and culture strengthens and reinforces a positive sense of identity; it provides young people a cultural foundation and helps protect them from feelings of hopelessness, isolation and being lost between two worlds. Giving young people this support is critical to their survival and the survival of our culture’ (Indigenous Elders 2014, p4).

For many participants in this study, assumptions of deficit were identified as potent constraints on their engagement and academic attainment at boarding school. Their teachers and peers had failed to recognise, much less commit to ‘unlearning’ their taken for granted; their meritocracy and the asymmetries of power inherent in the colonial legacy. As reported in previous chapters, in some schools, staff or management actively opposed the unlearning opportunities offered to them and this had implications for both the institutional habitus of the school (Burke et al. 2013) and to the First Australian students’ own habitus and their sense of belonging in that social field. But the opposite is also true. This chapter provides evidence to further support literature on the value of strengths based education that values, and commits to building, the cultural capital which bi-cultural young people bring to school (Sarra 2011, 2014, Brunzell et al. 2015, Brentro
et al. 2005, Wearne & Yunupingu, 2011). Until now the prevalence and influence of deficit discourse has been substantially under-theorised in the Australian context and has attracted minimal research (Fforde et al. 2013). This chapter contributes to the literature by drawing on the contributions of students and families to understand how combating deficit and building on a strengths base affected their education engagement and attainment. It also contributes to Bourdieuan scholarship by putting the as yet ‘immature concept’ (Burke et al. 2013) of ‘institutional’ or collective habitus to work ‘so that it might be further developed and fine-tuned’ (p3).

Most alumni participants reported feeling that they were in a subordinate position at school: their minority status in large non Indigenous schools; their low socio-economic background; their indigeneity; their perceived or actual academic struggles; their scholarship position; the failure of schools to recognise their cultural capital (Yosso 2005) all contributed to this. For some feeling ‘less than’ fed a desire to opt out of the system altogether. By contrast, the narratives featured in this chapter speak to a student body mobilised to fight back by using the system to succeed as First Australian students on their own terms.

I think schools, boarding schools and all schools and university institutions need to realise that cultural knowledge is a form of knowledge, and it’s not to be devalued just because it doesn’t have a degree behind it or it doesn’t have some sort of academic recognition… it’s actually really important, and cultural knowledge goes back 60,000 plus years, and there is a lot of value in it, I don’t know how else to put it you know. Schools need to stop devaluing it, and they need to stop thinking that cultural identity has nothing to do ... you know it’s just an add-on to the importance of education because they’re directly linked, and it’s so important to understand your culture... not only understand your own cultural identity, but know that you’re in a structure that won’t recognise your culture, and it will actively avoid talking about your culture, and that’s not right basically

[A21, urban]

Where political awareness in the student met with teachers or institutions prepared to reflect critically on how their guiding values and assumptions worked for (or against)
their First Australian students, those young people reported that they felt safe to invest in the school and to realise their potential within the dominant education system. The case studies that follow here are important insofar as they illustrate the process by which these participants were able to move between disparate, misaligned social fields, and construct for themselves a unique position between the worlds (Friedman 2016), habitus intact. Rather than being condemned to orbit between worlds, and without a firm anchor in either, these young people found that as they moved between worlds, spaces for new cultural possibilities opened up (Abrahams & Ingram 2013). As they embraced these possibilities, the investment they had made and continued to make in mainstream education was validated and strength was enabled to build on strength.

Literature affirms that for people who are socially mobile, moving between social fields (whether they be cross-class or cross-cultural), a pivotal factor in maintaining their wellbeing is to be surrounded by others who have had similar life experiences or trajectories (Goldthorpe 1979, Marshall & Frith 1999). These people provide ballast, they act as ‘reciprocal forces of ontological security’ (Friedman 2016, p5). Reay (2002) and Ingram (2011) underline the ‘substantial psychic cost’ incurred by young people crossing class boundaries through education. Similarly, Friedman (2016) speaks of the ‘enormous amount of emotional, intellectual and interactive work they must produce to combat the misalignment between …dispositions forged in the family and those needed for education success’(p6). His study of British social mobility found that reconciling such an array of difficult emotions ‘clearly demanded an exhausting amount of mental work, a load intensified by the fact that this was largely a solitary undertaking’ (p20). By contrast, data presented here establishes that when the process of reconciliation between dissonant worlds is shared, mediated by people who can name and acknowledge historical points of conflict, the ontological integrity of the individual is not compromised and education becomes a site of possibility and not of symbolic violence (Nairz-Wirth, Feldmann & Spiegl 2017).

In this study, participants most able to maintain ‘ontological equilibrium’ (Friedman 2016) were those who attended institutions implementing self-reflective, culturally respectful, strengths-based approaches to their Indigenous programs. They spoke enthusiastically about how these worked to maximise their sense of belonging and
encouraged them to strive. When schools or tertiary colleges recognised the prevalence 
and power of deficit thinking, and took active steps to overturn it, participants reported a 
different level of engagement and attainment. A number of young people recalled how 
certain teachers had been influential in helping recalibrate their own deficit mindset and 
this changed the choices they made on their education pathway. Of the tertiary students 
and university graduates interviewed, almost all cited participation in strengths-based 
programs as important enablers of their education success.

None of the participants who had dropped out of school or university had taken part in 
programs designed to proactively build understanding of how their education experience 
could be reconciled with the realities of their own life. This is not to suggest causation, 
but it does point to the value participants in this study ascribed to explicitly providing 
students with a critical perspective (Wallace 2016), as well as the knowledge and skills 
they need to become effective agents in their own education choices.

In the same way that deficit-framed barriers to engagement and attainment for participants 
were multi-factorial, participants who described successful strengths-based programs 
reported that they also addressed a wide range of issues at both individual and systems 
levels. This is consistent with literature that establishes that institutions have *active socio-
cultural effect* on the habitus of those within them (Burke et al. 2013). These programs 
began by prioritising authentic relationships as modeled by Sarra (2014). They eschewed 
the dangers of racial essentialism (Paradies 2006). Each was tailored to the specific and 
holistic needs of the individual. Each framed First Australian students, their families, and 
teaching staff as partners in the education endeavour. In each case schools privileged the 
voices of students and their families. In this way belonging at home and the integrity of 
the family unit were not disrupted despite physical absence and enduringly complex 
issues around reintegrating with peers at home. Where families were not in a position to 
offer active support, these program directors found ways to include and honour them 
notwithstanding.

In each case institutions were prepared to reflect critically on their own practice. Program 
directors, and most importantly school leaders, were willing to adapt and change to ensure 
that school was a culturally safe place for First Australian students at every level. They
were visibly proactive in addressing racism, however it was expressed. They were oriented to respect First Australian history and culture and this was borne out in school curricula. They recognised the need to work collaboratively with the First Australian community (Sarra 2011, Indigenous Elders 2014). This was evidenced by programs delivered by community leaders, initially to meet the needs of First Australian students, but also with a view to educating the wider school community. Participants described such programs as impacting how they felt about themselves within the school community and as learners. Their testimonies suggested that if they had been changed by education, they had left an equally indelible mark on those around them. Tangible evidence to support this claim is found in the interviews and biographies of teacher participants. In particular, the participant identified as T2, who after teaching a number of First Australian students and working on community partnership programs in an elite boarding school, resigned and took up a position teaching in a very remote school. At the time of being interviewed she had been working in that setting for several years.

Consistent with the literature, the young people whose narratives feature below were actively encouraged to see themselves as agents of change (Wallace 2016, Sarra 2011, Brentro et al. 2005). Within their families, at school, at university or through the agency of programs like ‘The Aspiration Initiative’, each was challenged and mobilised to be critically aware and attentive to important social issues. They were supported to imagine and realise futures full of purpose and hope. For some, school became a site of learning how to drive change in systems and entrenched mindsets.

When leaders of Indigenous programs in schools are asked what key dispositions of a young person mark them out as potential candidates for Indigenous scholarship programs, often ‘resilience’ is top of the list. An illustration of this is found in the publicity materials for the Indigenous program produced by one Australian school which announces: ‘The fundamental selection criteria are resilience, including a desire to complete Year 12, and the potential to flourish in a school such as [name of school]’. By contrast, Maori academics claim that the notion of resilience suggests that Indigenous people ‘have had little option but to bounce back or resile from things which may have been out of our

21 See: http://theaspirationinitiative.com.au
control’ (Penehira et al. 2014). Data presented here indicate that although resilience might enable a student to survive the challenges they encounter at school, resilience alone is not enough to ensure wellbeing or engagement or ultimately success for First Australian students. For young people to ‘strive and thrive’ [P19, urban] requires more than 

resilience. Penehira et al. propose a framework to describe the continuum of strategies, behaviours and outcomes that Maori have employed since colonisation to try to achieve positive outcomes. Pursuant to this framework, resilience is one of a number of interconnected and interdependent factors or strategies associated with achieving Indigenous wellbeing (p102). At one end of this continuum is resilience, a reactive state that is focused on surviving the negative impacts of racism and colonisation. At the other is the proactive strategy of resistance, which leads to flourishing and self-determination. Consistent with this model, participants in this study who reflected most favourably on how boarding school had shaped their post-school life were those who saw themselves as proactive in confronting misunderstanding and injustice.

To the extent that the notion of resilience focuses on the strengths or weaknesses of individuals rather than on barriers within the school or system, it is unhelpful. By contrast Penehira, Green, Tuhiwai Smith & Aspin (2014) argue that the notion of resistance is more useful because it indicates an approach of collective fight-back. It exposes inequitable distribution of power, and actively opposes negative social, political and economic influences (p97).

For the young people who benefitted from critical, strengths-based approaches either at boarding school or at a university residential college, the institution they attended was clearly a safe place for them to invest their energies. The implications of this for academic attainment are evidenced by Hattie’s findings that the willingness to invest in learning, to gain a reputation as a learner, and to show openness to experiences, are the key dispositional factors that relate to student achievement (Hattie 2009, p47). This in turn has implications for student self-concept (Valentine 2010).

In his synthesis of meta-analyses relating to achievement, Hattie (2009) found that there had been no meta-analyses exploring differences in ethnicity and achievement. Despite what he labels a ‘remarkable’ paucity of meta-analytic exploration of this issue he
concludes:

‘What seems more important is that students have a positive view of their own racial group, and that educators do not engage in the language of deficit theorising. Accepting that students come to school with different cultural heritages and that they can be allowed and encouraged to have a positive image of their own racial or cultural heritage is an acknowledgement of the importance of culture, and can show the students that they are accepted and welcomed into the learning environment (...) Further, so much discussion is about the tail or gaps between white students and students of colour – but such language is misleading as there are many gaps in achievement for students of all ethnicities, both above and below the mean of achievement. So often only the gaps below the mean are considered, and worse, generalised as if all students are near the bottom of the distribution’ (pp57-58).

For participants in this study, their self-concept as a First Australian was inevitably an issue. Each had attended boarding school by dint of an Indigenous scholarship. Each was known in his or her school to be part of the school’s Indigenous program. Consistent with the findings of the Te Kotahitanga project in New Zealand (Berryman 2011, Bishop 2003, Shields 2005), and the work of Chris Sarra and others researchers in Australia (Sarra 2011 Fforde et al. 2013, Bamblett 2015) interviewees reported that challenging deficit associated with indigeneity was essential to their sense of wellbeing, and their willingness to invest emotionally at school.

I will use an in-depth analysis of the narrative of two alumni participants to interrogate how a strengths-base approach to education shaped their self-concept, academic outcomes and post-school choices.
Case Study 4: Participant A19 [remote]

In many ways, the narrative of this young man (A19) embodies the archetype of a successful school experience. This young man came from a remote community in Western Australia. He can converse in five Aboriginal languages and has completed male Aboriginal initiation rites. He attended boarding school from Year 9 to Year 12 and transitioned to university. He was interviewed mid-way through an undergraduate degree. At that time, he aspired to a position in a post-graduate degree in Law because he wanted to advocate for his community and ensure binding legal protection for their traditional lands. He had a clear vision for his future, which he articulated with passion and pride.

He positioned the boarding school phenomenon as a normal part of growing up; perhaps a predictable coming of age event given that his father had also been sent away for his senior secondary years of schooling. He made light of what must have been a huge change in his life, saying;

So I grew up all my life in the [remote community] and then dad said, oh I might get you off to boarding school. [A19]

He acknowledged that staying at home for the senior secondary years was not an option, stating simply ‘[Capital city] is the place where people come to get an education...so I had to go away from home’. Unlike many other participants, he did not report experiencing homesickness. He reflected that boarding school was accepted as a ‘normal’ part of life in his community. He did not experience bullying or other forms of lateral violence when he returned home from school for holidays, although he did report that most of his time was spent with family rather than his extended peer group. He was the first in his family to attend university.

There was a quiet dignity in this young man’s understanding of his legitimate entitlement to a position at boarding school. He explained that his schooling was funded through a native title trust;
…because they're taking a lot of iron ore and stuff out of our country, so they have to give something back to the people, and that's one of the ways the mining companies do give back – they give money to trusts for the people to allow their kids to go and get an education.

[A19]

In this he was quite correct: payments to trust funds are paid directly by mining companies pursuant to legislation. Whether or not he was aware of these statutory arrangements, it was clear that he had understood from the outset that his position at school was of right. He was proud that his land paid for his education. Whereas other participants harboured an enduring perception that they should be ‘grateful’ to the scholarship foundations which supported them financially, this young man saw his scholarship as a question of justice: quid pro quo for the injustice he believed was being visited on his people through the mining of their traditional lands.

This sense of legitimacy was reinforced by the fact that other young people from his region were increasingly availing themselves of the same opportunities.

When I started off there were a few, but I’ve noticed in the last two or three years it’s really taken off now. There’s a lot more people, and there’s a lot more of my family members down as well, and there’s a lot of people I see around and oh, I know that person.

[A19]

The sight of familiar faces normalised the experience of attending boarding school and presumably provided a visible means of support a long way from home. This strength in numbers was relevant during term time, but presumably also important when he returned home for holidays. The director of an interschool support organisation confirmed this:

22 In the year 2014-2015, the Western Australian Department of Mines and Petroleum collected more than $5.3 billion in royalty payments. These funds were paid to the State Government and used for law enforcement, education, health, roads and community development programs (Government of Western Australia 2016)
In the past, brothers and sisters came down from up north, said goodbye at the airport. At the end of term, they’d meet up again and go home. It’s nothing like that now. Quite regularly we have weekly get-togethers; someone will go to the movies; everyone will be in contact and say well we’re all going here, who wants to come? We’re adding a community down here sort of thing… I regularly have get-togethers. We have student council meetings, I have camps with them. I just talk to them about... you know I have role models come and talk to them about you know being strong people and dealing with [issues, including around reintegrating at home]. It’s just constantly in their faces about you know just giving them aspirations to be something, you know. It’s just building up their self esteem to be able to put up with it .... Just building kids up. We’re in their faces all the time.

[Inter-school Program Coordinator]

This program worked to provide the ‘reciprocal forces of ontological security’ described in the literature (Goldthorpe 1979, Friedman 2016): not only did students benefit from a wider social network of First Australian students, they were provided with role models and adults to help them contextualise their education within a socio-political frame.

This young man reflected positively on every aspect of his school life. He spoke of his transition to school through an off-campus Year Nine program. This had enabled him to showcase his strengths and bond with other students on what he perceived to be a relatively level playing field. He reflected that ‘everybody in [Program] is sort of like everyone’. In his words, it wasn’t ‘straight into the classroom’ but:

…sort of out on the boats and on the river… I was used to bush sort of stuff and it was a bit similar, and a bit more sport in it as well, and going to the city and take photos for photography sort of stuff; practising.

[A19]

The process of socialisation and personal development preceding academic engagement had facilitated a strong sense of belonging, where he saw himself as an equal and integral part of the cohort. Through this off-campus program he established friendships with a range of boys who continue to be his ‘best mates’ today but he singled out local
Aboriginal students as his most valuable mentors in adjusting to city life, and his closest friends now, although he also stays in touch with non Indigenous peers.

In reflecting on his academic experience he was also positive. He claimed that in the classroom too, he ‘just slotted in very well’. He remembered being pleasantly surprised to find that there was not ‘much of a gap’ coming from the remote school that he attended until Year 8. He was at pains to point out that this was also a private school, perhaps reflecting the consistent priority his family had given to education. There was evident pride in his description of his parents who were clearly strong and effective role models. It was clear that his familial habitus (Burke et al. 2013) was an important part of his engagement at school. His ambitions to work as a lawyer in native title deliberations perhaps echoed the work of his mother in consulting with elders in the community on behalf of a native title trust.

He did not see himself as typical of the large (50 plus) cohort of First Australian students at his school. Even though other students started boarding school before him, he ‘noticed that [he] sort of started to go on top of them, and they started to stay back a bit’. Whereas he elected to do higher level academic subjects ‘the other boys they went into that path of woodwork and metalwork and that sort of stuff’. When questioned about why his trajectory was different to theirs, he pointed to the precedent set by previous First Australian students and identified the vocational pathway as ‘normal’:

I think because the previous boys went down that way, and with the Indigenous boys there hadn’t really been a certain individual or one of the boys to go the hard path or to do the normal classes, so the other boys sort of just following along and didn’t really go out of their...

Although he reported that ‘teachers have always been really great. They didn’t really discriminate between Indigenous and non Indigenous’, he added a caveat that:

With the Indigenous boys, what happened was that most of the time we were really good at sport, so the football and the basketball team and the athletics team,
the Indigenous boys were at the forefront. So it was sort of like we weren’t really the leading guys in the classroom, but when it came to the track we were up there.

His reflection echoed Harper’s (2015) findings, that stereotypes casting Black American scholars in Ivy League universities as talented athletes, fed into a culture of low expectations which became a barrier to achievement. Although he distinguished himself from other Indigenous students in terms of academic achievement, he identified strongly with them in claiming sport as a source of confidence and self-belief. He reflected:

All the other [non-Indigenous] boys looked up to us as well on the track and sort of we were needed and we worked together and then they’d help us as well in the classroom. [My italics]

He cited the experience of a First Australian classmate who stood out for his football prowess and had gone on to be drafted to an AFL club. It was clear that he was proud of his long association with him and I wondered which of these two would have been viewed as a hero by subsequent First Australian students at the school. Query whether others felt encouraged and empowered by this young man’s example to set academic goals, or whether they would have been more likely to aspire to sporting success and be content with a lower expectation academic pathway. This would be consistent with Fitzpatrick’s (2013) findings that when students identify strongly with non-academic subjects and feel that those domains ‘are ‘their’ space, where they ‘belong,’ they often acquiesce to the view that they are nonacademic, a process of negative internalization’ (pp144-145).

This raised the question of whether a policy of building on a student’s talent in non-academic domains ran the risk of minimising academic outcomes; whether sporting and academic success were perceived to be mutually beneficial or mutually exclusive. In answer, this young man cited the school’s Indigenous program as inspiring him to strive for academic excellence. When asked if he had a message for boarding schools around Australia, he responded:
To go to [Boarding School] and have a look at the Indigenous program there […] See what’s happening at [Boarding School] and see what’s grown from [Boarding School].

This was corroborated in an interview with the then director of the Indigenous program at his school who spoke about the importance of normalising success for First Australian students. Inspired by Sarra’s *Stronger Smarter* (2011) model and by Brentro, Brokenleg and Bockern’s (2005) *Circle of Courage*, she had implemented a strengths-based approach that began with individual success:

We changed the culture of [Boarding School] … I started to listen to this culture of kids coming in and saying I’m dumb, I’m no good, I’m at the bottom of the class, I’ll never achieve, and I flipped it. So what we had to do was celebrate – when anyone did anything well … we celebrated it. But after two or three years, students would arrive at recess and say I got an A, and all the other boys would go – high five, well done. I knew we’d shifted the culture when I had this boy sit down in that lounge room space, and he said, you know what, I don’t belong here anymore because I’m failing, and I went, ah, got it! When he didn’t feel like he belonged because he was failing, I knew that we could do what Chris Sarra dreamt of, and it becomes the norm … we’d normalised academic success … We started to see people stop failing when we shifted the culture of the way that they thought about themselves … What happened was a lot of students were getting through Year 12. We had 100% graduation for years.

This study has considered the implications of Western education being perceived as a private good (Labaree 1997), and the tensions this might engender for young people who identify with a collectivist culture (Indigenous Elders 2014). When asked how boarding school had changed him, this young man credited the experience with making him independent. He reflected that it had enabled him to establish an identity away from his family: to develop the capacity to form relationships with new people as well as finding a new and more confident voice.
Many participants admitted that for them, being singled out, whether for success or failure, was a ‘shame job’ [A22, remote], but this young man saw his achievements through a wider lens. Academic success increased his awareness of his potential to effect change for his community: a mission that he clearly took very seriously indeed. He recognised the power of an expanded social network, claiming:

[Boarding School] sort of opened a lot of doors. I don’t think I would have been here if I didn’t go to [Boarding School], right now, I don’t think I’d be at university if I’d stayed in [Remote Community]. [A19]

He expressed some frustration that the life of his younger cousins continued to be circumscribed by a narrower vision of life, saying of his own education journey:

It’s a better way, but it’s sort of disappointing to me sometimes when I see these people just grow up in the [Remote area] and then go and work for the mining company. I sort of don’t agree with that because it’s our country, and they’re cutting their own country up. [A19]

The strong political undertones in statements like this, recurring through our conversation, corroborated his claim that education had given him a voice. It was clear that he saw himself not only as a role model for younger cousins but also as an activist. He was both realist and pragmatist: willingly acknowledging that ‘there’s racism everywhere’ and that ‘we can’t really get rid of it all’, but nonetheless insistent that education has the power to effect real social change. This participant’s life story embodies the model of transformative action proposed by Smith (2003), whereby the elements of conscientisation, resistance and transformative action are a cycle, with each element being held simultaneously, and standing in equal relation to the other.

It was clear that this participant had a strong sense of self that derived from the intersection of the four main domains that defined his life at that point (see Figure 9)
In Bourdieuan terms he had achieved what had eluded so many other participants: a cultural and ontological equilibrium; a habitus able to reconcile the complexities inherent in operating at the boundaries of two social and cultural fields (Nakata 2007). What is important to observe, is that this was not a solitary project. This young man’s ‘success’ reflects a collective commitment to bi-culturality, in which family, school, student and the wider community were actively and cooperatively involved. If his habitus was transformed, so were theirs.
Case Study 5: Participant A29, Part II (continued from Chapter 8)

The narrative of this young woman (A29) is a study in overcoming trauma, much of it experienced in school, and the emergence of a strong sense of self fostered in a culturally safe tertiary environment. Her secondary experience could have led to her abandoning her education, but instead she found the fortitude to persevere and accept a place at university. She is one of the few participants in this study to have gained mainstream entry into a degree course with no special bridging program. In that environment she was given the opportunity to ‘rewrite the book’ [T5] on who she was. Her narrative is important in part because of the light it shines on institutional habitus, and the potential that culturally aware institutions and strengths based programs have to assist in repairing the damage of the past.

As previously explained, speaking of her school experience had caused this participant distress. Had her mother not been present and able to take the lead in the conversation, I would have discontinued. At that time, she had spoken so softly her voice was hard to pick up on the audio recording. At the conclusion of our interview she showed me the picture she had painted as part of her Year 12 Art folio (Figure 10):

![Figure 10: Artwork A29 (reproduced with permission of the artist)](image-url)

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23 See Case Study 3, Chapter 8
As a young person whose behaviours had been persistently pathologised, the extent of the trauma she sustained during her school years was reflected in the canvas. It is a vivid portrayal of a ‘habitus clivé’: one face presented to the world, manic and flushed, the other looking inward, pale and withdrawn, consumed with death, darkness and self-harm. She explained that she had been asked to create a piece of art exploring ‘the body or mental illness’. She had chosen the latter:

I guess I chose mental illness, and I think I was trying to portray like a split personality disorder or something... I don’t know.... I guess it just came from always being told there was something wrong with me in my personality.

[A29, remote]

The Indigenous program director at her tertiary residential college gave some insight into the serious toll boarding school had taken on this young woman:

They medicated her at [boarding school], they kept her really cornered and when she came down to [tertiary program] I said let’s rewrite the book about who you are. And she went for that, … she was really unwell when she came to us, like really unwell, but her transformation into a young, strong Indigenous woman who now wants to do documentaries about Aboriginal issues and her reconnection to culture, country and Nana’s book, all that happened in the last two years... [Now] she’s off medication, she’s healthy and happy. She’s well because she found out who she was.

[T5]

I conducted a protracted follow up interview with this participant during which I asked if she could elaborate further on her time at university, which had been markedly different to her school experience. She spoke about the ‘huge difference’ it made to her to be supported by cultural programs that made her feel that she didn’t have to ‘fit in with the other people completely’. She spoke about conversations with female elders where ‘we do a lot of personal experiences and they talk about theirs and look at ways to overcome certain things’. Her account accords with Keddie & Williams’ (2012) explanation of the role of ‘women’s business’ in Aboriginal culture, and particularly as it works to empower
bi-cultural women in the modern world:

‘Indigenous women’s business reflects the separate spheres and roles between Indigenous men and women and facilitates the powerful networks of female support, cooperation and unity that are characteristic of traditional and contemporary Indigenous culture’ (p304).

Consistent with Huggins (1998), they argue that ‘such forums and networks have been absolutely vital to the Aboriginal struggle against colonisation and racism and a great survival mechanism for Indigenous people. Conversations with older Indigenous women support younger women to know their past and develop a sense of identity and political agency as Indigenous women (Huggins 1998; Moreton-Robinson 2000). Keddie & Williams continue:

‘The aim here was to restore some of the lost knowledge of, and pride in, Indigenous cultural heritage. Resurrecting subjugated political and personal knowledges along these lines, reflects potential in relation to a genealogical approach to supporting students. … potential lies in the capacity of these forums to challenge the racist and gendered parameters that bring the students’ marginalised positions into existence. Such potential also lies in the capacity of these forums to recognise and legitimise alternative constructions of Indigenous femininity – to that represented in dominant colonial discourse’ (p304).

As critical educators, it was clear that these women had a profound effect on this young person. As she spoke of them, the work they did together and the work she now does with Indigenous children in schools, her voice gradually changed in timbre and pitch. As she moved on to talk about her future as a filmmaker, she assumed a decisive and confident attitude. Her changing demeanour bore striking witness to the narrative she recounted: at school she had had no voice; over the course of her university years her voice was restored. Asked what she would like to make films about she identified ‘racial and gender issues, especially representation in film and the media’ as her main area of interest. She explained further:

| I think I want to start out with documentary making, but on people... to get them to share their stories and stuff. Then I also want turn those stories into feature... |

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length films … I think probably once I got into my studies and like learned about more issues I guess, then I wanted to help with change. [A29]

Subsequent to our interview she returned to her community and began work on adapting her grandmother’s story as a member of the Stolen Generations for film.

Giroux (2016) reminds us that ‘education does not only take place in schools’. In relation to the substance of what is taught he observes that:

‘Pedagogy is always about power, because it cannot be separated from how subjectivities are formed or desires mobilized… pedagogy has to be made meaningful in order to be made critical and transformative, I think it is fair to argue that there is no politics without a pedagogy of identification; that is, people must invest something of themselves in how they are addressed, or recognize that any mode of education, argument, idea, or pedagogy has to speak to their condition and provide a moment of recognition. Lacking this understanding, pedagogy all too easily becomes a form of symbolic and intellectual violence, one that assaults rather than educates.’ (pp60-61).

For this young woman, the honest conversations she had with older Aboriginal women in a space where she felt safe to reveal her vulnerabilities and explore questions of identity were of great import. Combined with other aspects of Sarra’s Stronger Smarter model that had been implemented in her residential college, university presented her with the opportunity to ‘rewrite the book about who [she was]’ [Indigenous program director, tertiary residential college]. Given that she described her secondary years as a sustained attack on her identity as a young Aboriginal woman, for her, understanding the nexus between power and knowledge and identity was a logical and effective source of healing.

Bourdieu (1977, 1990) argues that individuals are able to receive and share in the history objectified in institutions (Burke et al. 2013). Burke et al. argue that ‘an institution can bring about an adjustment in the habitus of individuals within it through its collective actions (or the actions of those within it)’ (p11). This, they contend, ‘tends to bring agents into a state of homology’ which in turn generates and underpins the institution’s habitus. Bourdieu argues:
‘In short, being the product of a particular class of objective regularities, the habitus tends to generate all the ‘reasonable’, ‘common sense’, behaviours (and only these) which are possible within the limits of those regularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because they are positively adjusted to the logic of a particular field, whose objective future they anticipate (Bourdieu 1990, pp55-56).

The ‘common sense’ which dominated the institution in this case was actively self-reflexive (Reay 2004, Abrahams & Ingram 2013). It was committed to cultural recognition and to the celebration of cultural strength so as to annul the balance of power inherited from the institution’s colonial past (Sarra 2011, Brentro et al. 2005). It recognised these actions as essential as to student wellbeing, as well as to their academic attainment. At the same time, this common sense worked to shape the institutional habitus of the college. It also understood that students needed the opportunity to give back (Brentro et al. 2005), to contribute to society, and so this young woman and others in the same program were deputised to visit schools in their home communities and help reframe the boundaries of possibility for children and young people in those places.

By investing in the culturally inscribed habitus of the individual, the institution (or as Noddings (2015) reminds us, the flesh and blood people who make it up) had worked to rebalance the scales. Whereas this young woman had emerged from boarding school ‘really unwell’, her tertiary institution became a place of healing.

Conclusion

This chapter has interrogated the narratives of two young people who had vastly different experiences at secondary school. Where their stories coalesced was at the point that they were afforded equal opportunity to find strength, dignity and purpose in their own cultural backgrounds. At the time they were interviewed both participants were empowered and agentic in shaping their own education and life pathways. If the essence of critical pedagogy is a commitment to have students examine how they have been constructed ‘out of the prevailing ideas, values and worldviews of the dominant culture’ (McLaren 2009, p80), these two young adults and others like them were the beneficiaries of it.
Of all the participants in this study, university students or graduates were the most likely to demonstrate political awareness coupled with a sense of personal agency. This was reflected in their discourse and their life choices. Many had elected to work in either a paid or voluntary capacity with younger First Australian students in order to support them as Indigenous young people in non-Indigenous schools. Others ran professional development sessions for teachers with the express aim of improving cross-cultural understanding among staff. Several had obtained teaching qualifications in the hope of effecting systems-level change in schools. Their work and their intent exemplify Smith’s (2003) model of transformative praxis described in Chapter 3. These participants all expressed a commitment to social transformation, and their employment and even leisure choices reflected that. All readily acknowledged the enormity of the challenges facing their communities, but all exhibited what McLaren (2009) describes as a ‘social imagination that works within a language of hope’ (p80).

Many participants observed that as recipients of social justice scholarships and publically identified as the school’s ‘Indigenous scholars’, comprising a small minority within affluent, predominantly non-Indigenous schools where many described feeling ‘different’, often called on to speak publically about the benefits of their education opportunities at school functions and for fundraising purposes, to find strength and dignity in their cultural heritage was essential to them keeping faith with the identity and culture of their family and community.

At first glance these young people might be described as resilient, but a closer examination of their stories suggests that resistant is a more apposite descriptor. Whether it is the young man [A19]’s confident assertion that his position in the school was by right, not by charity, the young woman [A29]’s ambitions as a filmmaker committed to amplifying the quiet voices of people living under the shadow of prejudice, the student [A4] fighting to have the Aboriginal flag flown at his school, or another [A21]’s efforts to be employed at her previous school so that Indigenous students never again suffer as she had; these are the actions of strong, motivated, passionate and socially concerned young people. Either at school or in the years immediately after graduating they had identified and actively opposed racism, racial essentialism, injustice and oppression. Each
was adamant that their strength and purpose derived from pride in their family, culture and the place of First Australians in the nation.
Part 5

Shaping futures, shaping lives: Understanding the education dilemma

6. Possible Advantages of Boarding School Life over Northern Territory High Schools

a) The boys at boarding school would lead one life, at once fulfilling within itself. At high school, the boys would lead two lives, a school life and a hostel life, which would possibly be in conflict.

b) The boys would not come into contact with other Aboriginals at a southern boarding school, whereas a Northern Territory hostel they would. The advantages would be that fights would be fewer, assimilation progress faster and knowledge of English better in an all-European school-life.

c) There would be more facilities and opportunities for development at a boarding school.

d) A southern boarding school would probably be situated in a city and so the boys could benefit from such close contact with city life whereas Alice Springs or Darwin schoolboys could not.

7. Summary

I consider that the idea is a good one if:

(i) the school is well-chosen;
(ii) the boys are suitable.

However, I do not consider it would be the answer for all boys at all times. The idea must be considered on its merits for certain boys at the present moment. If the boys are of good value, then the benefit of a boarding school education seems to be greater than that derived from a local high school. But a second rate boy would benefit and contribute proportionately less and consequently might as well go to the high school. In sum, it seems the best answer for the best boys.

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Figure 1   Special Schools Bulletin, 1967 [Volume 4, No.3, pp 8-9]
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Introduction to Part 5

The education dilemma

And so to return to the questions driving this investigation: how does the experience of attending boarding school shape futures for First Australian youth? What is success? The chapters that follow discuss the outcomes participants attributed to their time away at school. Some of those are empirically measurable: academic results and pathways; awards won; positions attained. Others are harder to pin down: attitudes changed; culture lost or found; identities formed or reformed; tastes acquired; choices made.

The chapters in Parts 3 and 4 centred on issues that participants described respectively as constraining or enabling their engagement and attainment at boarding school. Narratives from the lived experience of individuals, told in their own voices, have provided glimpses of how boarding school life looked from the inside. The case studies featured were selected from a much wider range of interview data not because they revealed particular ‘truths’, but because they made visible issues of material importance to participants. As a non Indigenous researcher, and someone who continues to work within the boarding school sector, my constant concern has been to reflect on how the narratives might inform, and by informing transform, the ways mainstream boarding schools work to provide education opportunities for First Australian young people.

Part 5 focuses on outcomes. Interviews conducted across the continent indicate that there is no single, foreseeable pattern of outcomes for First Australian young people who have elected to go, or have been sent away, to school. Some experienced affirmation, academic success and the satisfaction of exercising agency in their adult lives. For others, the opposite is true: a significant minority of the alumni participants in this study reported having attempted suicide or having entertained suicidal thoughts either at school or after they left.

Developmental psychologists claim that youth mental health and wellbeing requires that a young person can create a ‘consistent narrative’ of their lives (Cohler 1982, Schiff 2014). From their accounts, it seems that a number of participants in this study had not
yet achieved that aim. Their narratives are redolent of the inevitable tension of walking between worlds, and this highlights the importance of mutually agreed and clearly articulated goals and expectations between schools, students, families and communities. Critically reflecting on the complexities and structural impediments they encounter is essential if boarding schools are to make a productive contribution to the lives of First Australian young people and communities. Uncomplicated narratives of success, and assumptions that excellent schools necessarily beget excellent outcomes, are unhelpful and overly simplistic.

This is not a zero-sum game. Presumptions about how boarding school education shapes young people can impact their whole future.

Recently the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory sentenced a young Aboriginal man for rape. The accused was drunk at the time of the offence, and the court acknowledged that he had a ‘problem’ with alcohol. In weighing the impact of this problem the judge found:

*It is an aggravating circumstance that you were under the influence of alcohol at the time. This is not a case where you were brought up in a disadvantaged community, that you were subjected to violence or a lot of alcohol as a child. You were not introduced, as far as I know, to alcohol or drugs as a child.*

*On the contrary, you were sent to attend Melbourne Grammar School in Toorak and you were there for four years of study and completed year 10. You are not a foolish man. You are not someone who has come from a background such that I should treat your alcohol problem as mitigating. On the contrary, it is aggravating.* (Mildren AJ, 2016).

The judge assumed that boarding school should have acted as a protective factor against alcoholism. That assumption alone is problematic, but this is not the place to discuss the culture or pattern of teenage alcohol use across Australia (Department of Health 2010). The accused here was educated to Year 10 at an elite school and it was deemed that he was ‘not a foolish man’. It is not entirely clear whether or how education to Year 10 precludes ‘foolishness’, but in any event his education background was cited as justifying
him being answerable to a higher standard and therefore deserving of a longer sentence. In this case, ten years and six months.

In his judgement, His Honour did not consider why the young man had dropped out of school at the end of Year 10. He did not touch on any real or potential consequences of that decision, particularly in the realm of self-concept and self-esteem. He did not consider whether the defendant had gone on to complete Year 12 in a local school, and if not, why not. He did not cite statistics that of all Australians, people living in the Northern Territory have the highest incidence of risky alcohol consumption (AIHW 2014, p11), and that it is likely that the accused was exposed to alcohol abuse, even if it did not occur in his family. There is nothing to suggest that evidence had been led on any of these issues. Perhaps they might have been relevant, perhaps not. At a distance, it is impossible to know, but interviews conducted in this study suggest that these may have been material questions to address. The fact that the accused had spent four years living in an elite boarding school was enough to change what might otherwise have been a mitigating factor in sentencing, into an aggravating one.
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Chapter 12

Understanding outcomes and framing success

For First Australian students to leave home and attend boarding school is by no means a new phenomenon, but the outcomes they achieve remain poorly understood. Despite significant government and private sector investment in scholarship programs to enable First Australian students to attend fee-paying, high-performing boarding schools, there are currently no independently evaluated, base-line or longitudinal data around their education trajectory or other life outcomes. This includes data on when students start, and the length of time they remain at boarding school. If they drop out, there are no data on their subsequent education choices. There are no disaggregated data on the academic outcomes First Australian students achieve in highly academic schools. Nor has any published research investigated the life choices they make after completing or discontinuing at boarding school: where they choose to live; what impact time away from community has had on their health and wellbeing, relationships, language, cultural traditions.

To begin to address these research opportunities, this thesis overall, and this chapter in particular, presents the outcomes young people and their parents reported as flowing from their time away at school. It begins by considering statistically measureable results, then uses a human capital frame, and Bourdieu’s related notions of *habitus* and *field* to interrogate the notion of success. These provide a means of understanding in holistic terms how time residing in a boarding school shaped participants’ life and learning outcomes.
Section 1: Academic outcomes

The presumed benefits of boarding school include increased rates of school retention, completion and transition to higher education. Although this is a qualitative study, and the small sample size means that results are not generalisable, transparency demands that quantitative data on the academic outcomes of this participant group be provided. The table below (Table 4) provides information on quantifiable academic outcomes for the 35 alumni participants in this study.

Consistent with claims of scholarship providers and relative to other First Australian students in Australia, a higher percentage of alumni participants completed Year 12: 30 out of 35, or 85.7% of participants completed Year 12. Of these, 5 had dropped out of boarding school and had later completed their schooling at a local or regional school, meaning that 71.4% had completed Year 12 at a predominantly non Indigenous boarding school. This compares with a national average of 60.3% of First Australian students, and 85.6% of all students completing Year 12 in 2015 (AIEF 2015).

In terms of the academic results they achieved, 18 of the 35, or 51%, attained an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (or ATAR)\(^{24}\). Of those, 4 of the 35, or 11%, attained an ATAR score that allowed them mainstream access to tertiary courses. Other tertiary students/graduates participated in special access programs or pathway courses to higher education. The average ATAR score at schools featured in this study typically hover in the high 80s or low 90s, but a large majority of participants reported receiving significantly lower than average scores, or no ATAR at all. By contrast, of the university students or tertiary graduates who participated, most reported attaining tertiary results commensurate with the general student cohort.

\(^{24}\) The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is the primary means used to assess and compare the results of school-leaving applicants for entry to Australian universities.
To the extent that participants identified factors that constrained their engagement and attainment at school, this study contributes to understanding why First Australian students attending highly academic schools might not achieve the same results as other students in their schools. However, further research is warranted to establish whether this small sample is representative of the wider population of First Australian boarding students.

Discrepant academic outcomes between participants and the general student cohort in their schools also highlight the need for further, independently evaluated and longitudinal research to better understand the role boarding plays across a lifetime of learning, beginning from early childhood education.
Section 2: Other education outcomes

Academic outcomes and pathways tell only part of the story. Boarding schools do more than bestow a certificate of education on students. More enduring is the imprint left by immersion in a different cultural frame of reference, which works to shape expectations, attitudes, perceptions of self and the outside world. The challenge here is to adequately synthesise the diverse life and learning outcomes reported by a heterogeneous participant group.

In considering outcomes and ‘success’ it is appropriate to consider data through a relational lens. Relationality has been a recurring theme throughout this work, and as a central tenet of Indigenous wellbeing (Gee 2014), it must take its place here. Outcomes will therefore be considered through the lens of relationship to what one participant described as ‘the fundamentals of Aboriginal life’: ‘land, language, culture and identity’ [P3, remote].

Outcomes by reference to gender

The narratives that inform this thesis are replete with references to gender (and to a lesser degree, sexuality). Different issues arose for male and female participants, and opportunities offered by schools were not always perceived on the same terms. As participants described their roles in family, the responsibilities they carried and the motivations that drove them to accept places in boarding schools, patterns emerged in which gender was a factor. Of the alumni who attended high-performing schools in or near capital cities, almost all attended single sex schools: by definition the habitus of the school was gendered and this had implications for how students came to see themselves.

Men and sport: the physicality/intellectuality binary

For young men, the importance of sport and/or the dream of emerging as a professional sportsman was close to ubiquitous. In some instances, what had looked like a ‘golden ticket’ over time turned out to be a road to nowhere. One young man, who had been achieving well academically in his regional government high school, explained how he
had accepted a place in a prestigious southern school in the hope of being drafted to the
Australian Football League. Although he credits his year at the school with teaching him
important life skills (and in particular ‘how to ask questions’ [A24 urban]), he felt his
academic outcomes had been diminished. Consistent with the literature (Fitzpatrick 2013,
Harper 2012, 2015), he reflected ‘they saw me as a footballer rather than someone that
was going to achieve anything in the academia side of things.’ Asked whether he had
experienced racism at school he did not hesitate to affirm that he did;

I guess I learned early how to deal with that, and rather than making it into a conflict, for
me it always was about educating … It was just stereotypes around you know Aboriginal
people are only good at sport…

[A24 urban]

Notwithstanding he saw the physicality/intellectuality binary as a manifestation of
racism, it was clear that he did not reject it altogether:

I think it’s... sport in general is very important for Aboriginal people in that Aboriginal
people have that natural talent to play at the highest level of whatever they decide to play
… it’s actually a good stereotype that’s been placed on Aboriginal people, if there ever
were a good stereotype … I think that it would demoralise an Aboriginal person’s self-
worth not being good at sport, well then what are you going to amount to? You’re going
to amount to like other Aboriginal people are you? The kind of stigma that’s attached.

[A24 Urban]

He recognised sport as an island of competence for many Aboriginal students, a
springboard which enabled a strengths-based narrative to emerge surrounding their
attendance at school. He saw hope that this could generate the possibility of improved
educational outcomes, even though his own experience was the opposite. The validity of
his argument is borne out by the success of the many sporting academy programs running
in schools throughout Australia, many administered by the ‘Sporting Chance Program’
(House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2016). Of
particular note is the Clontarf Foundation, which works in regional and remote high
schools throughout Australia and uses sport as a vehicle to attract students to holistic mentoring programs and provide an opportunity for them to experience positive achievements (Goddard 2015). The recent Parliamentary inquiry into educational opportunities for Indigenous students applauded these sport-based programs, but expressed ‘great concern at the lack of parity in funding provided to girl’s education programs in contrast to boy’s programs (p22).

For participants in this study who achieved their goal and went on to accomplish in the sporting domain, the importance of educational achievement was somewhat lost in the hype. Many admitted that they had invested in sport to the neglect of their schoolwork. This led one interviewee, an old man who was the progenitor of a host of professional sportsmen, to reflect ‘they could be doing the same thing – being a champion footballer and being a champion in their education. That’s the two things I see’ [P5 very remote]. He observed that somewhere along the line the priority given to educational achievement had been sidelined, and it frustrated him enormously that he saw no benefit flowing back to his community even when young people had been going away to high performing boarding schools for many years. That the colonial balance of power between his people and White bureaucrats and administrators in his community remained unchanged left him with little hope for the future:

I keep mentioning it you know. You blokes... there’s positions here... sometimes the position comes up and you’re not there, we’re still underneath them, we’re still holding onto their hands and skirts and trousers. … And I keep saying in a hundred years... the next hundred years we’ll be in the same position that we are now… that’s what I keep saying. But you look up and there’s no-one here running the ... no Aboriginal people running the show.

[P5 very remote]

His observations call into question the contributions that boarding schools make to transforming disadvantage in remote communities. This man’s sons and grandsons had attended schools with long and strong academic histories, and he struggled to understand why they had not reached equivalent intellectual benchmarks to their non Indigenous peers.
The physicality/intellectuality binary, and the racial stereotyping of ‘Black’ and ‘Brown’ bodies within the physical realm (Fitzpatrick 2013, Harper 2012, 2015) was a live issue for many of the male participants in this study, but it would be wrong to deny the role sport had in encouraging educational engagement and attainment, or in facilitating reintegration into home communities. Sporting prowess is an important form of cultural capital in many First Australian communities. It is also an important part of the institutional habitus of all-boy schools. In terms of maintaining an ontological equilibrium, of constructing a consistent narrative of self (Cohler 1982), sport was reported as playing an important role for many of the male participants in this study.

Women and the colonial legacy

The complexity and durability of gendered and racialised stereotypes as they impacted female participants is also evidenced in the data informing this study. Although the physicality/intellectuality binary is also evidenced in relation to female participants, it is more closely related to female sexuality and femininity than to sporting ability. As such, the binary does not have the same up-side for young women as it has for their male counterparts. Moreton-Robinson (1998) asserts that:

‘The cultural specificities of Aboriginal women's existence are embedded in historically constructed relationships with White people which continue to inform processes of intersubjectivity in Aboriginal and White domains. State intervention into the lives of Aboriginal women was part of the social processes that shaped the nature of these relationships. After the 1970s, which saw a change in government policies, many of these women obtained a tertiary education after they had raised their families. They acknowledge that they are now freer than when they were young. However, their narratives show that they know such freedom has not come without cost nor has it changed in any fundamental way the nature of their sociality. Their sociality is still predominantly maintained and intimately connected to Aboriginal domains’ (p285).

For alumni women in this study, all of them had attended single sex schools. A brief review of the webpages of those institutions reveals a unanimous concern with female empowerment: girls’ excellence, their academic abilities, their capacity to change the
world and be whomever they choose to be, their leadership potential, their strength, courage and creativity are all extolled in school slogans, by-lines and mission statements. It is interesting to reflect on how these discourses played out in the lives of First Australian young women in these institutions.

A number of female participants showed particular acuity to the impact of gender roles, Indigenous stereotypes and the ‘cultural specificities of Aboriginal women’s existence’ (Moreton-Robinson 1998, p285). These young women revealed a sophisticated political perspective on their position at school. For many, school was simultaneously a site of empowerment and disempowerment and they were anxious to convey the complexity of their experience. Education had given them choices that they would otherwise not have had, but many were acutely aware that these had been won at a cost.

A number of participants from remote communities acknowledged that their attendance at school was at least in part driven by sexual norms in community. Consistent with the findings of Hamilton (2015) in her case study of Worawa Aboriginal Girls’ School, one motivation for sending daughters away to school was that they should be ‘women before they are mothers’ (p24). Teen pregnancy was a negative motivation for sending young women to boarding school, acknowledged by parents and alumni alike. When asked what life looked like for friends who had not been away to school one participant replied:

Well 50% of them are probably pregnant now and have kids. The others probably dropped out of school and are still living with their parents and all that stuff, that’s probably why dad sent me away … because he didn’t want me to have that kind of life … he just didn’t want that life for us where we would get pregnant at a young age and … have nowhere else to go except for living in the same community that we always lived in

[A34 very remote]

Quite apart from the difficulty this produced for boarding school girls returning home and attempting to fit in with their peers, this raises the question of how the normalcy of teen sexual activity and pregnancy impacts attitudes at school. In particular, it is interesting to reflect on how such norms work to reinforce colonial stereotypes of Aboriginal women.
built around a physicality/sexuality view of the Aboriginal ‘other’. Moreton-Robinson (1998) acknowledges ‘pervasive and entrenched relations of power through which racial, sexual, economic, political and cultural oppressions were part of public discourse sanctioned by the state (p283). Although educators are unlikely to see themselves or their work with First Australian students in these terms, some female participants felt schools had been hypervigilant in policing their interactions with boys, in a way that they felt was discriminatory. Others felt that their feminine identity was challenged at school, and that a lack of awareness or acceptance of the validity of their own cultural norms meant that they were humiliated. This is illustrated in an interview with two young women from a remote community:

| A22  | When we first went there, we were there for about a week … and the teacher bought us deodorant and she put up a big paper with our own rules on it… On the piece of paper it said – have a shower twice a day, in the morning and at night; clean sheets every Friday and all this other stuff R   | And how did that make you feel? A23   | Like we were different, and me and her was laying down together, just laying down in bed, and … the boarding house parents said we were lesbians A22   | Because we were sleeping in our knickers, and our cousins... like we do that at home, and she said, no-one sleeps together in our culture, and she was like if I take this to the press, then you’d be all over the newspaper and all this stuff... just ‘cause we were sleeping together in the same bed... she accused us of being lesbians |

Moreton-Robinson (1998) observes that:

Aboriginal women's experiences speak of intersubjective relations with White women which were contained by distance, unease, racial superiority and often cruelty. White women participated in gendered racial oppression both as unconscious and conscious subjects through an ideology of true womanhood which positioned Aboriginal women as less feminine, less human and less spiritual than themselves’ (p285).
In this instance staff at the school may very well have been working to ensure that the students would not be ostracised by other girls in the boarding house; many young women identified the ‘bitchiness’ they encountered at school as a constraint on education outcomes. Nonetheless, the public display of instructions relating to personal hygiene meant that they felt embarrassed and belittled. Their bewilderment at being ‘accused’ of lesbianism, and the invocation of public humiliation on a grand scale through the press, speak to a fundamental misunderstanding of cultural norms and an exercise of power which worked to disincentivise integration into the boarding community. When cultures collide in the bathroom or the bedroom, young people are in a particularly vulnerable situation: a person’s intimate life is integral to their personal identity. Again, Moreton-Robinson’s perspective is helpful:

‘…assimilation is an inept explanation for different cultural constructions of gender. Learning to speak English and mimicking the customs of the coloniser does not mean that this fundamentally transforms the self that has been socialised within Aboriginal social domains. What it means is that Aboriginal women learn to acquire new knowledges in order to act and function in contexts not of their choosing or under their control within the dominant culture. The accumulation of these knowledges does not mean that they are assimilated. Instead what it points to is that Aboriginal subjectivity is multiple because of the conditions under which it has been and is shaped. However, multiple subject positions do not preclude the existence of a core subject position which has the ability to acquire, interpret and create different subject positions in different contexts’ (p277).

Contextualising cultural conflict such as that encountered by these two participants requires a mature perspective and bi-cultural confidence. This is women’s business, and requires the involvement of those with the authority to deliver it.

It is against this type of cultural dissonance that many of the older female interviewees reacted. Here the insights of one young woman, in her final year of a bachelor of nursing at the time of being interviewed, are particularly enlightening. The full verbatim transcript of our conversation is reproduced with permission as Appendix H. Like most female alumni, she had attended a private all-girls’ school for the duration of her secondary education and she made it clear that her sense of self as an ‘Indigenous woman’ had been honed by conflict she had experienced at school.
She freely admitted that her first response to attending boarding school was a reaction against the gendered school environment:

I had this pre-assumption that all girls, you know, like it was completely foreign the idea to me, and being a young girl I thought … I’m not going to socialise with any boys, it’s not my cup of tea.

By the end of Year 8 she had been expelled from the boarding house because the school felt she needed to be separated from the other Aboriginal girl residing there. She recalled:

Mum and the head boarding mistress, Miss R, made a conscious decision to pull me out at the end of Year 8 because I was a little bit naughty, and I use that term very lightly because I don’t think I was any naughtier than any other child in there … , I was just a bit mischievous with my friend G.. who was also Indigenous. … it’s not that I wasn’t naughty ... we would sneak out to each other’s rooms … once we said we were going to this Christian thing after school when really we snuck over to [Boys’ school] and G saw this boy that she’d been talking to, and then they were worried because they couldn’t find us. That was probably the worst thing that we’d done, and that’s when they decided, okay, no, something needs to be … put in place to separate you two … Because I was on a bursary, I think they really used their … advantage to be like … it is on her contract to apply certain standards... to apply herself and to behave in a certain way that reflects the [boarding school] attitude blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Her repetition of ‘blah’ gives some indication of how she assessed the merit of the school’s reasoning, their degree of cultural sensitivity and their use of power. Her awareness of asymmetries of power and the trauma produced when schools fail to recognise the full life experience of First Australian students is discussed in Chapter 6. It is worth reiterating here that it was the school’s lack of cultural awareness that had driven her to return as a volunteer during her university years. She was adamant that other young women should not suffer as she had and that they should be empowered to fulfil their
culturally inscribed responsibilities at home without having to sacrifice educational success.

Despite her conviction that things needed to change before the school could be deemed to be a culturally safe place for First Australian young women to invest their energies, she spoke more enthusiastically of her schooling than almost any other participant. Her candid reflection on the benefit of attending an all-girl’s school is moving. Paradoxically, it speaks to a degree of cultural continuity between home and school. It also illustrates her ability to find a point of ontological equilibrium in a sea of cultural dissonance:

I look back and I am so thankful that I had the opportunity. I am so grateful, and if I could just tell the world, it would literally... it’s not for everyone, but for me, I loved that I was around women, and I think a lot of that actually does come from my Aboriginality. I love being surrounded by women. I love my mum and my nanna. I love having … we call it like women’s business … I love it … it was so suited to me, and I think it really prevented me from going down a path of promiscuity ... I don’t think I’m any different from any other girl, but seriously, I have friends that were the same age as me that were ... having sex, and doing sexual things before my time … I still did socialise with boys, but .... it made it less normal so that whenever presented with that opportunity, I didn’t just kind of bite at it …. it’s so obvious that so many girls suffer with self confidence issues, myself included, and I could tell you right now, if I went to a co-ed school … I know that if I had more interaction with males at that age, and a man told me or a boy told me I was beautiful, I’d be head over heels. He could have had sex, done what he wanted with me, and I’d be fine. So I’m so grateful that I went to this all girl school, and I think education-wise … like I just completely planned this different life. I think I’ve always been an ambitious person, and [boarding school]... I can’t explain it, it’s really set me up for uni, which obviously secondary school try and do to set you up to that next part of your life.

[A20 urban]

Her reflection affirms the school’s commitment to empowering women, and an implicit determination to controvert male hegemony. She had benefitted from a female
environment where sexual norms might be reframed though a feminist lens and where she was encouraged to find strength and strive for excellence in education and in life. At the same time, school was a site of symbolic violence which subjected her to the same stereotypes as those discussed above. Asked how school had set her up for later life, she claimed that it had given her a voice and the socio-political language to speak back to the system:

I think it really expanded my vocabulary to be able to be in that more formal and almost like higher class environment where people were able to express themselves better. And I think it’s really empowered me as an Indigenous woman to be able to say – okay, so I’ll learn your way so that I can talk your way, so then what I want to say to you you will understand. So it’s kind of like that it’s actually my agenda or what I’m trying to do when I’m going back to [boarding school] to say okay, for the [boarding school] girls … I’m really trying to get my foot back in the door at [boarding school] to be like, okay, … this is how you taught me to talk – now I’m going to tell you what we need to start doing here, and actually being what I didn’t get at school

Her narrative is a tribute to her strength, her generosity of spirit, her creativity and her adaptability. It is an example of what it means to take the good with the bad: she uses the system for her own self-improvement but never loses sight of her ultimate objective of working for the benefit of her own community. She describes her own suffering as generating a resistant attitude which is sustained long after leaving school, and which provides a proforma for responding to female Indigenous disempowerment wherever she sees it.

To a degree this young woman is the prototype of a successful bi-cultural Australian woman, but her success is not necessarily the school’s. Before institutions or organisations can hold young women like her up as evidence of the worth of their programs, they must also heed the critique she gives of them. This young woman is not alone in identifying institutional racism, or describing being treated as aberrant or disruptive as she struggled to cope with the competing demands of a complex home life
and a regimented school environment. Many of the young women who contributed to this study recounted experiences in which the echoes of colonial tropes, used for generations to subjugate Australia’s First women, could be heard. These sit uneasily alongside discourses of feminist empowerment and possibility which are used to construct and represent the social field of girls only schools in Australia (Alliance of Girls’ Schools Australasia 2017).

- Outcomes by reference to language, culture and cultural identity

In relation to how participants described the impact of boarding school on their language and cultural heritage, the history and geographic location of their home communities emerged as an important point of difference.

Many of the older participants from remote or very remote communities with a first language other than English showed great consternation that going away to boarding school resulted in the loss of language and changed young people’s attitudes to community values and systems. Those from regions where language has already been lost, or who had been separated from their own families as children by force of government policy, were less likely to articulate the same anxiety. These people felt that the loss of language or cultural identity could be made up in other ways, although they did not reflect on when or how that might be achieved.

A number of participants claimed that an assimilatory ideal (as reflected in the epigraphical bulletin above: Figure 11) lies at the heart of boarding school policy and they reacted strongly against it, even if they expressed gratitude for the value of the education they had received at boarding school. Some grandparents had never gone away to school but had emerged as strong community leaders and advocates on the national stage. They expressed frustration and dismay at policy decisions that limited or eliminated place-based secondary education options. One woman, a warrior for education in her community and someone for whom the diminution of culture was a major concern, reflected at length on the agenda to ‘normalise’ children through boarding schools. Along with a number of senior community members from across Northern Australia, this woman despaired at the erosion of traditional protocols when young people are exposed to Western mores:
Once they go down south, they’ve got this [whitefella] influence coming back. Sometimes they dress like [whitefellas] and there’s protocols in our culture the brother and sister protocol, that you’re not allowed to walk around in your shorts … in front of the brothers, or swear in front of brothers… There’s many other things that we’re not allowed to do in front of brothers, and that’s not being respected any more.

[P14, very remote]

Coming from a community with continuing cultural practices, she made the strong political statement that ‘we do not want to revive our culture’. The irony that Australia boasts the longest continuing culture in the world but has education policies that, she believed, endangers it, was not lost on her. While she and others placed enormous value on education and appreciated the necessity of young people being equipped to engage with the dominant culture on equal terms, she did not see boarding education as achieving that end.

A number of alumni participants also reflected on the impact that their time away at school had had on their language and cultural knowledge. Several cited the loss of language as the reason that they opted not to progress to higher education:

It … feels like I’m missing out on my culture … because I haven’t been to women’s business for the last seven years and it feels like I’m missing out on a lot of stuff that I’m meant to know which will probably help me in the future like teaching my kids and their kids… so they can help their kids to teach their kids … so it’s hard not knowing all this stuff you know.

[A34, very remote]

One participant gave some insight into how hard he perceived it to be for young people to negotiate the expectations of two worlds. The cultural expectation of leaders in his community did not take into account the real-life challenges that he encountered by living in a dominant cultural setting:
Sometimes you get lost... they’d say hold onto culture, which is important but like not a lot of the people who are strong in culture know what’s outside of the community.

[A1, very remote]

A number of young people shared his frustration that their parents or community leaders did not understand the demands of boarding school, or their need for parental involvement at school. They described a fundamental mismatch of understanding the role parents play in mainstream schools. While they never questioned their parents’ ethic of care, they pointed to a vastly different cultural frame which left them ill-equipped to respond:

My parents have never been down here … So my parents don’t actually understand what I do down here, they don’t understand how I go to school or how [the city] works because they’ve never been here, so it’s hard for mum and dad to understand what I’m going through sometimes, and it’s hard to talk to them about it and everything.

[A34, very remote]

Her claims were corroborated by others. A recurring issue for alumni was the lack of effective communication between home and school. Their parents may have encouraged them in their education, but they were generally not well positioned to represent their child’s interests at school. Some who sought to advocate met with structural impediments and asymmetries of power that frustrated them, but the more common issue to emerge from interviews and discussions with parents in very remote places, was how little they understood the realities of boarding school life. Some could not name the school that their child attended. This was not through lack of caring, but as one participant explained, reflected a cultural perspective on the duty of care they expected from schools:

If I as an aunty take someone’s child and look after it, I look after that child like my own, or if you come into my home … whatever’s there is yours. So our ways of thinking and our world view is very much created on that. So when someone’s handing their child over to go to a boarding school, their expectation is that [they’ll] take that role.

[P11, regional]
This cultural dissonance meant that many alumni reported feeling nobody understood them either at home or at school. This created a separation between home and school that left them feeling isolated and with no common ground between their two worlds, with the possible exception of accomplishments on the football field.

While all participants referenced the need for young people to be equipped to straddle two worlds, many commented on the complexity of staying true to that objective. One pointed to the responsibility schools have to ensure young people remain connected to their community:

\[ \ldots \text{it's a hard thing for white fellas to fathom because oh, doesn't he understand he's got this great opportunity to break the cycle?} \nonumber \text{Doesn't he understand? Yeah, he bloody understands all that, but he's also got this inbuilt \ldots \text{connection with his family, and he wants to see his family do better \ldots} \text{it might not be perfect, but it's not a perfect world, and he's a victim of a range of things that have occurred through his community...} \text{I think these schools, done right, can provide great opportunities. If they can facilitate the right cultural connection back to their communities in a positive sense.} \]

[A31, regional]

Those participants who reported attending or working in schools or tertiary colleges committed to facilitating cultural maintenance confirmed this perspective. A number of alumni had attended institutions implementing Sarra’s (2011) ‘Stronger Smarter’ philosophy and claimed that school had left them more firmly grounded in their cultural identity. Because leadership and the wider community were committed to ensuring that the institutions were culturally safe, participants reported a sense of shared purpose and solidarity that encouraged their belonging at school as well as their enthusiasm to grow and share their cultural knowledge.

Findings point to the need for increased education for the parents of boarding students and programs to ensure that when they elect to send their children away to school, parents are making an informed choice. They also highlight schools’ responsibility to understand
the bi-cultural obligations of First Australian students and find appropriate and respectful ways to help them balance competing cultural objectives. If the object of Indigenous boarding programs is for students to walk in two worlds, it requires adults in each of those worlds to undertake the same journey, and to expect to meet up on the way.

- **Outcomes by reference to social capital and social connectedness**

Participants who attended schools committed to celebrating and strengthening their cultural connections, even in the face of difficult home circumstances, reported higher levels of satisfaction and greater engagement at school. These schools eschewed racial essentialism and were committed to finding and building on students’ individual and community strengths. They were more likely to report mixing with the wider school population and to have maintained cross-cultural friendships after leaving school. By contrast, participants who attended schools that did not invest in building strong community connections or supporting students’ cultural identity reported difficulty moving between worlds both while they were at school, and also in the years that followed. This had implications for the social networks they could call on in their post-school lives.

Many participants recalled that at the outset boarding school seemed replete with opportunity and excitement. At the same time, most reported socialising predominantly or even exclusively with other Indigenous students at school and this meant that many did not form strong relationships with the wider school community. They described coming to realise that they belonged at school only to a point, only within certain groups, or for some, not at all. One young man explained:

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You’re … living with the wealthiest people in [the state] … they’re the highest class, and … you’ve got to figure out where you belong because you know, you go to school with them, but you don’t really belong there.
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[A33, regional]

His response was to gravitate to ‘the naughtiest guys’ in the school on the grounds that they were the most ‘down to earth’. Ultimately, this had led to him being caught up in
social issues which replicated those in his home town, but he justified this by saying ‘this was my escape from being in that world... it was an escape from feeling like I didn’t fit in.’ He was one of a number of participants who claimed that while school had changed them, it had not made them just like all the other students. These young people had maintained a strong sense of being ‘other’. For some this was a conscious choice. Their experience belies claims that attending a high-performing school necessarily results in alumni enjoying the benefits of a wide and powerful social network. Many participants reported that the only alumni with whom they have stayed in touch are other First Australian old boys or girls.

- Outcomes by reference to individual agency

One of the most consistent observations of alumni participants was that their time at boarding school had made them ‘independent’. When I asked what this meant in real terms, several described it as being self-directed, or self-reliant, although these characteristics did not always emerge while they were at school. One young man reflected that during his school years everything had been ‘hand given’ [A1, very remote], and that had bred in him and many others, a learned helplessness in all things academic. For him, the six months he spent at university was where he developed life skills that later enabled him to live an independent life.

Many young people felt that their enhanced communication skills were the most useful legacy of their time at boarding school. One young woman reflected:

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Having a really good foundation of English ... it expanded my vocabulary to be able to be in that more formal and almost like higher-class environment where people were able to express themselves better ... It’s really empowered me as an Indigenous woman to be able to say – okay, so I’ll learn your way so that I can talk your way, so then what I want to say to you, you will understand ... What I’m trying to do when I’m going back ... is to say okay ... this is how you taught me to talk – now I’m going to tell you what we need to start doing here, and actually being what I didn’t get at school ... so that I can give it to those girls so that they can hopefully enjoy that experience better than what I did ...
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[A20, urban]
She was one of many participants who identified an ongoing benefit of her time in boarding school as giving her a voice that enables her to ‘take on’ structures of power and demand attention. Having learned to ‘talk your way’ she uses her expanded vocabulary and familiarity with boarding school to ensure that the current generation of students do not suffer in the way that she did during her school days.

- Outcomes by reference to change: adaptation, assimilation and lateral violence

All participants in this study readily admitted that boarding school had changed them or their children. For some, change had happened by osmosis, whereas others described making deliberate, knowing choices as proactive and engaged individuals. They exercised what Evans (2007) describes as a form of ‘socially situated agency’. These participants described their education as empowering, and it was clear from their words and their biographies that they were living life on their own terms.

Others were still coming to terms with how boarding school had transformed them and their life story, and for some the thought of how they had changed was an enduring source of distress. Consistent with the notion of ‘bounded agency’ (Evans 2007), where an individual’s efforts to take control of his or her own life had met with structural forces that pushed them in another direction, they described becoming passive, and blamed themselves for having failed. An example of this is one young man who had completed Year 12, transitioned to university, but later dropped out. He repeatedly reflected that he had been ‘forced’ into his educational pathway against his will, and reflected ‘I feel sorry for the people who worked hard ... they expected something else from me’ [A1, very remote]. The high personal cost he had paid along the way was not factored into his assessment of ‘success’ or ‘failure’. Despite his conviction that the school had been motivated by ‘statistics’ rather than his wellbeing, he did not find fault with the institution or with individuals who had denied him agency over important life decisions.

For a number of younger participants, the personal transformation they underwent at school resulted in social isolation, at home and at school, and confusion about their imagined future. In each instance, participants described unconscious changes that
immersion in the school environment had brought about in their behaviours, attitudes, dispositions and expectations, their habitus. One young man described this metamorphosis as an almost out-of-body experience:

I could feel myself changing. I could see myself talking differently to how I would back home ... I mean I’d speak differently, I’d act differently and it was noticeable to me.

[A32, regional]

When asked how they had changed, many participants replied by reference to the way they spoke - the words they now use, the volume at which they now speak. Others spoke of adopting manners which they came to believe were ‘right’ or ‘respectable’ [A21, urban], or making life choices that were perceived to be better than those available at home:

Oh you just see how other people live around you. It changes the way you live, what I eat, sleep, work ... it changes. Like the fact that you know that there’s something else out there, it changes the way you do now. Like if I didn’t go to [the city], I would have just settled to be in the community.

[A1, very remote]

Knowing what is ‘out there’ was described as one of the big advantages of attending a boarding school, but where ‘knowing’ led to ‘adapting’, this often resulted in lateral violence when participants returned home.

Improving education is essential to increasing employment options for First Australian people (Langton 2004), but where they had been amongst a small number of young people singled out for special education opportunities, participants reported that this had ramifications for relationships and their sense of belonging at home. Consistent with what is described in the literature on social and human capital (Portes 1998), this was true both in the short term as they pursued their education and in the longer run as their different standard of living came to reflect the opportunities they had been given and the investment that they had made in self-development. Similarly, exposure to the wider world and different attitudes to materialism and individual ownership, concepts of time,
competition, leisure, a different ethic around the priority of work over relationship, and other culturally embedded norms (Mejudhon 1997, Russell 2008) all served to differentiate them from peers who had remained in community. Many participants reflected that these issues complicated their position at home, some to the extent that it was easier not to return. One young woman explained this by saying:

They were happy that I was getting an education and getting myself out of there, but they weren’t happy that I had to be a completely different person to do it. [A13, remote]

Although she understood the genesis of the lateral violence she experienced at home, it did not make the reality any easier to bear.

This young woman had completed school and was in her final year of tertiary study at the time of being interviewed. She was one of those who saw their education, and their personal development, in political terms. She reflected on her school days with satisfaction, claiming that her time at school had enabled her to escape the ‘toxic environment’ in her home community, but she was also cognisant of the price she had paid in cultural terms. This was particularly evident to her in relation to the loss of her language:

I don’t talk the way that they do anymore because I don’t really speak Aboriginal Pidgin anymore. Like I can understand it, but it just sounds really weird coming from me, like I can’t say it ... because it was taken from me. They told me at school that you can’t speak Aboriginal Pidgin because no-one understands you and you’re never going to get anywhere with it. Like it was just really hard, so I had to learn proper English. [A13, remote]

She was one of a number of participants from remote or very remote communities who regretted their loss of language, and who recalled being reprimanded at school for speaking in language because it was considered rude. She described her assimilation to ‘Caucasian’ society as an active choice, but spoke of the constant tension she experienced as she endeavoured to fit in with dominant cultural norms:
I wouldn’t say it was an act … because I had taken on some of those things into my own personality, but to have to constantly make sure that … my tone … the way I’m speaking and the way I’m behaving on a general level, …in … a Western society framed by Caucasian … principles and priorities, … to have to constantly make yourself be in that and do that is really draining.

In her article *Imagining the good Indigenous Citizen*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2009) argues against the ‘discourse of pathology’ whereby Indigenous people are positioned as being ‘unsophisticated, righteously impotent, incompetent and naïve’ (p70). Cultural superiority morphs into moral superiority and leaves ‘the integrity of patriarchal white sovereignty’s inherited right to rule unchallenged’ (p77). The political exigencies Moreton-Robinson describes are reflected in the lived experience of the young woman here, but what distinguished her from other participants who described the process of assimilation in equally visceral terms, is that she had a political metalanguage to critique it:

I decided at a young age that I’m going to talk the way I want to talk, and I’m going to act the way that I want to act, and I’m going to say the things that I want to say, and if you don’t like it, then I’m really sorry that you feel uncomfortable, but think about why you’re uncomfortable … I wanted to succeed, and they said I can’t succeed if I don’t speak English. Like it’s really hard … they don’t understand the Pidgin language is a language in and of itself. So they don’t really make concessions for it, they just kind of think we’re not smart and we’re not articulate and we’re not like you know… we don’t understand anything.

The cultural dichotomies that this young person had to reconcile within her own life can be subtly described using the Bourdieusian frame to provide an alternative to the assimilate/resist binary that might otherwise apply.
Bourdieu argues that ‘school is a central generative space for habitus, where the student is directly and indirectly imparted with patterns of thinking and being’ (Stahl 2015, p22). Where home and school are grounded in the same cultural values and priorities, the personal growth that occurs through formal education is organic and integrated with every part of life. For this young woman however, the institutional habitus of school, driven as it was by aspirational, achievement oriented dicta, and the presumption of intellectual and cultural superiority, was at odds with the habitus of her own life world. For her, the social fields of home and school were separate and distinct in every way, and she described little or no real correspondence between the two. The individualistic, Western habitus of the school collided with the collectivist, relational habitus of home. Personal growth in one social field became a source of disjuncture in the other, and she needed to find a means of reconciling the two, or suffer the consequences. Her political acuity provided that tool.

Although one father was matter-of-fact in his assertion that ‘there’s no crime in making a choice’ [P3, remote] and that young people should be able to code switch as they move between words, none of the alumni participants reported that this came easily to them. Instead, for many, the dissonance between their individual habitus and the social field of either home or school resulted in the pain of a habitus divided against itself, a ‘habitus clivé’ (Bourdieu 1999), a heart ‘left in t’wain’ to borrow Shakespeare’s more poetic turn of phrase. This was exacerbated by encountering lateral violence at home.

By contrast, where participants were given a framework through which to understand the social field of the school, and their own position in it, they were equipped to position their personal growth in socio-political terms. They could then enact strategies to make the experience of attending a high-performing mainstream school meaningful within the frame of their own life. These young people developed what Stahl (2015) describes as a ‘counter-habitus’: a deep internal self, grounded and strategically aware such that it remains consistent, even as it moves between dissonant social fields, in this case the fields of home and school. When we return to the model of social and emotional wellbeing proposed within the health domain (Gee 2014, Dudgeon et al. 2016), the practical implications of this become apparent. Far from being esoteric concepts, the thinking tools of habitus and field add depth and complexity to the notions of belonging and community social connectedness.
Outcomes by social and emotional wellbeing

Where young people described their school as unaware of, or unresponsive to, how the dissonance between home and school was impacting them, they were likely to disengage emotionally and academically. A number described this issue as precipitating mental health issues. Several participants reported that either they or their child had been medicated for depression but they felt the school had made no attempt to understand or address the root cause of their emotional distress. Several reported that as parents or guardians they were not kept informed of their child’s mental state or consulted before symptoms were medicated.

A number of these participants had dropped out of school before the end of Year 12, although others persevered either through their own tenacity or because they felt that they were coerced into following the education trajectory others had laid out, and were powerless to exercise their own volition. Many described becoming increasingly distressed over time by the lack of agency they had over life choices. Some reported adopting maladaptive behaviours to cope with their emotions. These included excessive or inappropriate alcohol consumption and in some cases, suicidal ideation or attempted suicide. A senior leader from a remote community articulated in graphic terms the inherent risk of dislocating young people from their cultural background and depriving them of personal agency:

The other pressure is they... can’t see a way out of this lifestyle without feeling they’ve left their culture, left their families … So if they’ve moved from there to here because they want a better lifestyle, they deserted who they are, they’ve lost their identity. So… and it goes back to that language, culture and identity… If you lose your identity, then what’s in life for myself? I’ll kill myself.

[P3, remote]

In the recently released report into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (Dudgeon et al. 2016) the authors described ‘health’ as:

‘…a culturally informed concept, conceived of as ‘social and emotional wellbeing’ – a term that is increasingly used in health policy but in this context carries a culturally distinct meaning: it connects the health of an Indigenous individual to the health of their family, kin, community, and their connection to
country, culture, spirituality and ancestry. It is a deep-rooted, more collective and holistic concept of health than that used in Western medicine’ (p17).

The importance of community social connectedness is similarly highlighted in the model created by Gee et al. (2014), and is implicit in epistemological claims that position education as a public good (Noddings 2003, Nussbaum 2010). In understanding outcomes, and in problematising the notion of ‘success’, connections to family, kin, community, country, culture, spirituality and ancestry are relevant. Education outcomes that diminish or sever relationships which give a young person’s life meaning, context and purpose, can hardly be described as ‘successful’, but this is not reflected in rhetoric or policy discourse currently surrounding Indigenous boarding programs.

A number of participants described in emotive terms the sense that they were ‘stuck’ [A16, remote] between worlds; unable to feel fully themselves either at home or in dominant cultural settings. Some described these emotions as occurring while they were at school, others reported that their sense of being lost in orbit intensified in the years after they left. This was reflected in their choice of domicile, especially in the case of participants from remote or very remote communities: many came and went between towns or cities and home communities but did not put down roots in either world. This was evident in the claim of the young man [A1, very remote], who described his then (regional) domicile as a ‘halfway point’. He had lost any sense of purpose at home, and claimed ‘you can live there when you’re about to die, and it would still be the same, and nothing will change.’ In terms of any prospective leadership role he might play in his community, he reflected that cultural protocols at home meant that his voice would not emerge until his standing in the community was established over the course of time. Consistent with Portes’ (1998) notion of ‘downward levelling norms’, he claimed that as a ‘community member’ he felt that he would ‘go and do the same things’ as people who had never been away to school, as a way to demonstrate his solidarity with them and dispel any sense that he thought of himself as superior. Older participants ratified these claims; one community leader spoke about this pattern in his community:

You know you get someone who ... gets a degree – how do you deal with the loyalties you know? They go back when his uncle dies and he has to go back to that community for a funeral, and for his aunty, sister, brother or whatever – and
then slowly, slowly he gets brought back in you know with all the pressure, and I’ve seen it happen… within five years of behaving like that… It hasn’t changed outcomes.

Useem and Useem (1967) coined the phrase *third culture* as part of their study of expatriate American men in India. Their work describes an interstitial or ‘third culture’ that exists in the shared communalities of the expatriate lifestyle (Pollock & Van Reken 2009). While they identify a number of benefits, there were also negative consequences for those who lived and worked in a space that did not allow for a strong sense of belonging in either their home or their host environments. Where the cross-cultural experience occurred during the years when a young person’s sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world were being formulated, the experience was found to have profoundly disorienting consequences (Pollock & Van Reken 2009, p22).

In this study, the sense of living in two worlds, but belonging in neither, was a recurring theme. The cultural hybridity many participants experienced, also described by post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994), meant that they felt they were neither one thing nor the other: not fully recognised or accepted either in the dominant cultural world or in their community of origin. Several young people described becoming internally divided and losing any compelling sense of self. Whereas policy assumes that the experience of attending ‘*high performance schools down south*’ will result in young people being able to ‘*orbit between two worlds and enjoy the best of both*’ (Pearson 2011), many participants in this study report feeling that their school experience had condemned them to a life in perpetual orbit: they come and go between worlds, but described finding it difficult to put down roots and establish a meaningful life in either.
Section 3: Understanding success

One of the sub-questions of this thesis is what constitutes ‘success’ for young people attending boarding schools. Despite Giroux’s (2016) observation that in the modern world ‘that which is not measurable withers’, this thesis has argued that education ‘success’ should be defined more broadly than Year 12 completion and transition to work or further education (AIEF 2015). It has employed a critical lens to argue that ‘successful’ outcomes should take into account human wellbeing. It has argued that a ‘successful’ education should position an individual for a ‘good life’. It should enable a young person to construct a coherent narrative of his or her own life (Schiff 2014). It should invest a learner with the skillset necessary to enable active citizenship (Nussbaum 2010, Brendtro 2005). It should mobilise a young person to be a critically engaged agent and alert to his or her own civic rights and responsibilities (Smith 2003).

To adjudge success by what they anticipated from boarding schools, key participants all spoke in terms of personal development. This was consistently described against a backdrop of community wellbeing and advancement. Central to all was the much vaunted, but until now untried presumption, that by attending high performing boarding schools, young people are equipped to ‘walk in two worlds’. A second shared assumption was that by attending boarding school, young people would develop the skills and attributes needed to exercise agency in their own lives and thereby become ‘self-determining’ (see also Benveniste 2015). Every participant believed in the transformative power of education and expressed a desire that they, or their children, should enjoy the same spectrum of opportunity as any other young Australian. None foreshadowed that this would come at the cost of their identity and belonging at home.

A number of young people reflected with frustration on the pressure that was exerted on them to meet particular benchmarks of success, which they felt had no relevance to their own lives, and which diminished the value of life choices they made within the context of their own communities. One young man stated:
I know a lot of people from [my community] that just are not there anymore, but what I disagree with is when they say they go on to do bigger and better things – well that’s a personal opinion, and if you want to talk about success … it relates to any success that you want. If people have … choice that they want to live in a community, … as long as they’re doing what they want to do, I don’t see the problem, I don’t see that it’s less than … other people going out and doing bigger and better things … there’s no graph to grade it, it’s just the same. It’s just a different setting.

[A25, very remote]

This young man had dropped out of boarding school at the end of Year 11. He had returned home and had begun to smoke gunja, heavily. He attempted suicide- although he did not attribute this to his time at boarding school. He completed year 12 at a local school and went on to complete an apprenticeship. At the time of being interviewed he had recently received a major award for his work as a boilermaker. Perhaps more importantly, he had also helped establish an anti-youth suicide program that has been cited as an example of best practice: an Indigenous-run, grass-roots program making an important contribution to combatting youth suicide in his region (Dudgeon et al. 2016). He strongly contested Euro-centric notions of education success and assertions that young people achieve better life outcomes being away from home. Asked to describe what ‘success’ meant for him, he reflected on his own rich and diverse life experiences:

So success for me... is self-satisfaction for me... self-satisfaction, and that … comes from the smallest of things. Success over my life.... I spoke about my mates and getting them through school or getting them through just to graduate, that was a small bit of success for myself. I look at that, and I look at them now and go ... I’ve had a role in that, … I feel proud of them at where they are. … Another instance of success was when I had depression - restructuring my life, setting these goals and achieving them, and then getting out of that state … that’s a massive success story for myself. … I don’t think I’ll ever fall back into that state, and that was hard work, really hard work, but it was just the small measures I took over a period that … it was just success after success after success. … And
people say oh do you have trouble talking about this stuff? Well I don’t have trouble talking about it because I know exactly what happened. What I have trouble about is when I think about it and think – was I really in that state? It’s just... it’s hard to comprehend with where I am now and look back and go – shit, was I really there? But I took these measures to get where I am now, and that’s major success in my life, and in doing that, it just … sets you up to achieve things better. It’s an experience that has no value on it. It’s just an experience that’s set me up to do things I want to … I co-founded Alive and Kicking Goals, a big success story there [laugh] …We addressed an issue that was ... I suppose it’s still stigmatised right across Australia, but the success in that it’s grassroots run by Indigenous people for Indigenous youth. One of the issues we saw was with youth suicide … you get all these service providers coming in, all these White Australians coming in telling Indigenous people what to do or what to try and do, and the fact of the matter is, Indigenous people aren’t going to do what they’re trying to say, they’re just not role models in their eyes ... we did a study on it with ... the Griffith University of New South Wales and we found … that these Indigenous kids just all reacted to Indigenous role models, which is what we knew would happen. They reacted better. A lot of them were inspired at how the program is run. Yeah. So you got that success story there [laugh].

[A25, very remote]

Success for him was framed in collectivist terms, and closely associated with self-satisfaction. In an extended interview, he had nothing but good things to say about his time at boarding school. Given his education trajectory I expressed some surprise at his enthusiasm, to which he replied, ‘Yes, if you’d interviewed me five years ago I wouldn’t have found a good thing to say’ [A25, very remote]. He appreciated the many positives from his time away at school, but they were only one part of a larger education process, the cumulative results of which were a fulfilling, grounded, culturally robust life based in his community. A community where his contributions improved life for the greater whole.

Participants like this young man provide perspective on the diversity of ‘success’. They represent a wide range of interests and political persuasions. They include people from
remote places who insisted that ‘kids who go away, grow away’ [P15, very remote]; that they come back with different attitudes, and ignore ancient cultural protocols. They include those concerned about the many young ones who go to boarding school for a short stint then never go back to school at all. They include people who identify the outcome of boarding by what happens to those left behind. These participants resented money being drained away from place-based programs that build capacity not only through education, but also through the delivery of education. But the opposite is also true. Other participants spoke about how boarding school had made them independent, in life if not always in learning. It had given them vision and purpose and direction. It had made their aspirations achievable. It had strengthened their cultural identity and fed their spirits. Others reflected on changed perspectives, tastes, dispositions. Consistent with other studies (Guenther et al. 2015), none of them spoke about their ATAR score until they were asked.

The antonym of ‘success’ is ‘failure’. Where students do not attain outcomes deemed by institutions, policy makers or even families to be ‘successful’, the implication is that they have failed. The consequences for a young person internalising this message has deleterious flow-on effects for their self-concept and associated mental health outcomes are a salient concern (Haswell 2013). To the extent that the education objectives of parents, students, schools and policy makers are discrepant, measures of ‘success’ should be enlarged to ensure that young people are validated and encouraged in their learning journey.

In Australia, education policy and the rhetoric surrounding scholarship programs typically focus on the opportunity high-performing schools offer to Indigenous students. By contrast, little attention is given to the work high-performing schools need to undertake to ensure that they are safe places for Indigenous students to invest their energies. Rarely are privileged schools challenged to critically reflect on why they should, or how they might, overcome disparities of power inherent in the colonial legacy. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of recognition of First Australians embedded in school culture or in the curriculum. Many reported that many schools appeared reluctant to acknowledge, much less seriously engage with, the dissonance they experienced between home and school. Very few felt that their school was committed to
working with their family or community on building bridges to ensure safe passage for them as they walked between two worlds. Most were left to traverse that space alone. I question whether educational advances that diminish or sever a young person’s sense of belonging to his or her community can ever be assessed as truly ‘successful’.

Alumni reported that where schools failed to acknowledge or respond to the wider context of their lives, their engagement with school was diminished. Family and community connectedness is the cornerstone of Indigenous wellbeing (Zubrick et al. 2006, Gee 2016), but many participants reported that scant emphasis was placed on how schools might work with families to maximise their sense of belonging at home or at school. They reported very little communication between home and school at all. It was common for schools to engage primarily or even exclusively with a ‘middle man’ so that direct family/school contact was rare. A number of parents reported that they felt frustrated when they tried to advocate for their children. They resented being patronised in meetings or treated as second-class citizens at school events. Many were acutely aware of their scholarship status and reflected that they did not feel they could challenge racist incidents because to do so might jeopardise their position in the school. Several reported that being seated at the back of the dining room or being served last at functions was humiliating and they felt it publically demonstrated their family’s position in the school. These accounts do not speak to culturally safe environments (Bin-Sallik 2003).

Boarding schools have an important role to play in providing quality education to Indigenous students, but participants in this study were quick to stress that they should only ever be seen as one option in a suite of education choices for Indigenous families. A number of participants observed that they should not be seen as replacing quality place-based alternatives for secondary students, particularly those from remote communities. A number of parents and community leaders spoke of the sacrifice they made in sending children away. Others felt that the return on investment was insufficient to justify current policy preferences favouring boarding: they pointed to the pattern of young people falling into prevailing behaviours when they returned home, however long they had been away. Not only did they come back without exhibiting any of the benefits parents had sought from a high-powered education, they had assimilated to different social norms and had come to disrespect traditional cultural protocols. Where young people had dropped out of
boarding school, participants pointed to a recurring pattern of them dropping out of education altogether. This is an issue that requires further research attention as a matter of priority.
Chapter 13

Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand what factors or influences participants identified as important in constraining their (or their child’s) engagement and attainment at school. Further, it sought to understand how the same factors or influences had been instrumental in shaping their subsequent lifestyle, attitudes, ambitions and social networks.

1. What factors or influences did First Australian alumni of pre-dominantly non Indigenous boarding schools identify as important in constraining or enabling their engagement and attainment at school; and how have these been instrumental in shaping their subsequent lifestyle, attitudes, ambitions and social networks?

2. What factors or influences did the parents and/or key community members of First Australian alumni of pre-dominantly non Indigenous boarding schools identify as important in constraining or enabling engagement and attainment at school; and how do these participants believe those factors or influences have been instrumental in shaping the lifestyle, attitudes, ambitions and social networks of their young people?

Essential to answering these questions has been to problematise the value attached to different, and culturally inscribed forms of human, social, cultural and intellectual capital within the disparate fields of home and school. Throughout, the notion of habitus has been ‘an essential point of theoretical orientation’ (Stahl 2015, p33) which has provided insight into how individuals have navigated the demands of two worlds, and the extent to which in their post-school life, they have been able to construct a consistent narrative of their lives (Cohler 1982); to attain ontological equilibrium.

For each of the key participants in this study, the social field of their boarding school represented a foreign land. Quite apart from their cultural, linguistic and geographic background, each participant reflected on the class differential they experienced at school. Most reflected in one way or another on the contested history of Australia, and on how
the echoes of the past resonated in their lives and the lives of their communities. An example of this is found in the testimony of a young woman who recounted an event that occurred on the morning of our interview:

I get the bus to university every day, and I got out and there was a couple of drunk mob there, they’re always in the same spot, and one of the women was ... like they were laying on the ground and she was just fully into him, and everyone’s just standing... and no-one did anything, everyone just stood around staring and shocked and disgusted. I was running late for a class so I just ... it’s sad … I see that stuff, ‘cause my dad was an alcoholic and not a violent alcoholic but that’s what he died of – liver failure, and so a lot of my family are really, really bad alcoholics, so I’ve seen it, I’ve experienced it, and yeah, I think the only way to make it better is education.

Most reported that class combined with their publicly acknowledged indigeneity to make them feel ‘other’. The exception to this were the young men feted for their sporting prowess, although for most of them, the price of recognition as a sportsman was any expectation or affirmation of intellectual achievement. This is consistent with existing literature (Sarra 2011, p75, Fitzpatrick 2013, Harper 2012, 2015).

Most participants reported that at least at the outset, their individual habitus was at odds with the institutional habitus of the school. Many reported feeling like a fish out of water, and for some, the weight of the world sat heavy on their shoulders. The life and community transforming opportunities that might flow from a first-class education were apparent to parents and alumni alike, but there was also an appreciation of the cost associated with investing one’s energies in a social field imbued with dominant cultural values, expectations and agendas. Objectively, the possibilities offered by these schools may appear limitless, but in reality, individuals reported being in a constant state of renegotiating their sense of self with the expectations of two disparate worlds.

Bourdieu argues that contemporary social hierarchies and social inequalities are produced and maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination (Schubert 2012, p179). He describes the results of such domination as symbolic violence. In the schools represented in this study, questions arose as to whose knowledge was legitimate,
whose values and priorities were sound, whose social and cultural capital had currency. For most participants, the differential life outcomes and historical antecedents described in Chapter 1 had been their lived reality. Given the colonial heritage which contributed to the construction of institutional habitus in the boarding schools represented in this study, they are rightly described as dominant cultural institutions. To the extent that they were unwilling or unable to engage with what that might mean for First Australian students, they risk visiting symbolic violence on those young people.

While the thought of schools as a locus of violence is confronting, the more pertinent issue in answering the research questions posed in this study is how young people and their families responded when their own life world was depicted as less important, or less valid than that embodied in the school’s institutional habitus. An example is provided by participant A34, whose mastery of five Indigenous languages was neither recognised nor valued by her school as a strength to be built on. Instead her perception that all the other girls were ‘richer and smarter’ than she was had eroded her commitment and confidence to achieve in the mainstream by mainstream standards. In this case, as in many others, an election was made not to submit to year 12 exams. By opting out of the competitive process, her eligibility for higher education was curtailed, but her prioritisation (even if unwitting) of kith, kin and culture was made evident. This young woman’s choices, apparent in her increasingly oppositional attitude to scholastic application, call into question the apparently endless opportunities available to her through education ‘success’. Her choices illustrate Stahl’s (2015) concept of aspirations being ‘based on the dispositional structures of habitus’ that ‘embody the possibilities-within-limits of given social structural positions’ (p23).

Many participants described engagement at school as requiring a constant re-negotiation of self: ‘a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation’ (Langton 1993, p33). These young people had made active choices about what to absorb and what to repel. Consistent with Ingram (2011)’s findings, it was clear from their testimonies that ‘operating at the boundary of two fields’ had required ‘a lot of emotional work’ for many alumni participants. As evidenced by the experience of the young man [A4] who sought to have the Aboriginal flag flown at his school (Case Study 1), this work took precedence over academic engagement. Similar dynamics had taken their toll on the
education outcomes of a number of participants. In this case and others, the work of singlehandedly chiseling out a place of cultural respect in a dominant cultural setting was lonely work which over time diminished enthusiasm for school life and their sense of belonging at school.

A failure to engage with the complex amalgam of factors at play when a First Australian student enrolls in an affluent, high performing boarding school is akin to replicating Stanner’s (1968) ‘cult of forgetfulness practiced at a national level’. A willingness to ignore the lived experience of these people once again becomes a ‘structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape’ (p189).

Data showed that when institutions worked to invest First Australian students with Western cultural capital, but failed to make an equal and opposite deposit into their bank of Indigenous cultural capital, young people were left in ontological crisis. In the words of one young man, ‘you’ve got to figure out where you belong because … you got to school with them, but you don’t really belong there...’ [A33 regional]. For many participants, the disequilibrium that ensued produced what Bourdieu describes as a habitus clivé: a sense of being neither one thing nor the other. Many described feeling trapped on the outside of two worlds, in what one participant described as an ‘in between place’ [A1 very remote]. For these young people school had indeed become a site of symbolic violence. As they had assimilated to different cultural norms, and acquired different cultural capital (especially fluency in English), their primary habitus had become ‘destabilised’ (Ingram 2011). At home, they were accused of being ‘smart’ [P15, very remote], or being a ‘coconut’, black on the outside, white inside [A22 and 23]. They were subjected to the special pain of rejection by those they loved most. Several young women reported lateral violence so severe that it was not safe to return home. Tap root severed, their capacity to flourish in either world was seriously diminished. Their narratives illustrate what Bourdieu (2002, p510) describes as the ‘contradictions of succession’ where upward mobility equates to ‘success as failure’: a betrayal of those who have nurtured and created them (Friedman 2016).
By contrast, data establish that when schools committed to building Indigenous projects on the foundation of cultural respect; when they recognised the value of the Indigenous cultural capital and the primacy of Indigenous social networks to the social and emotional well-being of their First Australian students; when they recognised the high personal cost of walking in two worlds, and the hard emotional work required to reconcile competing world views; when they actively made space for that work to be done; when they committed to relationship and worked closely with family and community to navigate liminal and culturally contested spaces in and between worlds; when they had the courage and integrity to identify and redress the residual asymmetries of power inherent in colonial-era institutions, then mainstream boarding schools became sites of possibility. The experience of the young man identified as A19 (Case Study 4) is one example of this. So too is the biography of the young woman described as A29 whose experience of school and university were so vastly different (Case Studies 3 and 5). Her narrative is important insofar as it speaks to the restorative potential of a culturally safe educational institution. Both of these young people emerged from university benefitting from what Stahl (2015) describes as a counter-habitus, replete with the generative capacity to create new responses that allow it to ‘contest, resist, and possibly transcend social and economic conditions (p33). Findings here lend empirical weight to Abrahams and Ingram’s (2013) claim that a cleft habitus is not always negative but can become a resource to facilitate the negotiation of new social fields.

Theoretical Contribution

Burke et al. (2013) identify collective or institutional habitus as an ‘as yet immature concept’ (p3). Along with Reay (2001) they recognise the importance of putting the notion to work in the context of research so that ‘it might be further developed and fine-tuned’ (p3). This research contributes to that development.

The application of Bourdieuan sociological tools to the empirical data informing this study, and particularly the lens of habitus in all of its individual and collective iterations, has helped to identify a range of factors which participants described as significant in shaping their school experience and their post school lives and choices. It has exposed assimilatory norms and mindsets, and drawn attention to the folly of a singular,
achievement driven measure of success. It calls into question policy built on the unequivocal presumption that social mobility through education is both a private and a public good (Friedman 2016). By the same token, it has revealed the potential of mainstream schools to redress injustice and colonial asymmetries of power. It has reaffirmed the importance of eschewing deficit and establishing strengths-based programs. These findings are of practical import to scholarship providers, schools and policy makers. They should assist parents and communities in making informed education choices for their youth.

The contribution this thesis makes is to identify what conditions or dispositions enabled young people to extract spaces for new cultural possibilities to emerge. What the data establish is that those young people whose habitus had evolved, and who were able to maintain a strong and cohesive sense of self as they moved between misaligned words were those who had the socio-political perspective and the socio-political language to explain their experience. In short, they could position themselves on Obama’s (2008) long arc of history and hold onto the hope that their lives were working to bend it inexorably towards justice.

Beyond the contribution this study makes to Boudieuian scholarship, it also adds to the slim volume of research into the lived experience of First Australian students boarding in predominantly non Indigenous schools. Here alumni, their families and community leaders were invited to reflect on their school experiences and to ‘speak back’ to schools and systems. Their testimonies provide primary source evidence to build understanding of how the experience of attending boarding school works to shape the future for First Australian young people. Their narratives expose structural issues which worked to constrain engagement and attainment, as well as factors that worked to encourage, empower and support young people as they strove to maximise the opportunities that attending a high-performing school provided.

When they were asked to speak about how boarding school had shaped their lives, people had more to say about systems than they did about themselves. Very few spoke of academic outcomes or personal achievements. Certainly, they told personal stories, but in the main those served to illustrate a point they had to make about the system: the school;
the teachers; the scholarship provider; the tertiary institution; the curriculum; spoken and unspoken norms and expectations embedded in all of the above. They also spoke of their home communities: families, peers, language, culture, values, priorities. In both contexts, they spoke about change and transformation, and the often thorny issue of belonging. They described different worlds and the different orthodoxies that attached to them.

This study has described for the first time, dissonant understandings of the notion of ‘homesickness’, used by schools and students as an umbrella term, to cover a range of social and emotional situations. It has identified the incidence, various iterations, and impact of racism in ‘mainstream’ Australian boarding schools. It has exposed the tendency for schools to presume that offering scholarship places to First Australian students, and providing them with academic supports, is all that social justice requires. It provides evidence to support Young (1990) and Fraser’s (2007) arguments that justice also requires recognition: in this case through the curriculum; in the evolution of school cultures with their inherent, colonial-era asymmetries of power and presumptions of cultural superiority; in providing space for Aboriginal voices in schools; through a solid and sustained commitment to authentic, holistic, dialogic relationships with families and communities. It has identified the impact of antecedent trauma on First Australian young people living and studying away from home. Findings reveal a pattern of misunderstanding in schools’ handling of students whose behaviours are deemed to be aberrant. Far from being recognised as the normal outworking of trauma, participants describe being punished for their actions and for some this resulted in their re-traumatisation. This study affirms the life-transforming power of education, but challenges uncomplicated narratives of success that obscure structural issues which work against First Australian students.

It has been equally committed to building understanding of factors that work to enable positive outcomes. A number of participants attributed their success at school and their choice of post-school pathway to their relationship with a particular member of staff. Typically, these participants spoke of teachers or school leaders who eschewed deficit thinking and did not essentialise them as an ‘Indigenous student’. These were people who recognised strength in each individual and helped them find the strength in themselves. These were the teachers most fondly remembered. They were the people who participants
affirmed as contributing to their education engagement, attainment and ultimately success. Some spoke of school leaders who were prepared to acknowledge the normalcy of racism in Australian schools. They understood that racism manifests in different ways and were proactive in driving change, even when that meant taking drastic action against perpetrators, or reviewing school curricula or pedagogy. They were schools which accepted that part of running an ‘Indigenous program’ was to critically examine the school’s existing culture and traditions. Where schools took these obligations seriously, participants reported feeling gratified that they had been catalysts for change: they expressed sentiments of respect and loyalty to their school and were more likely to have remained connected through alumni organisations. By their actions these schools had demonstrated recognition of their position at what Nakata (2007) describes as the cultural interface. By their reflective praxis and their unwavering support for First Australian students and families, they had made that complex zone simpler to navigate. These were the schools and systems participants identified as enacting socially just education.

Implications of research

This research has implications for education policy, practice and further research.

- **Policy**

Indigenous education policy in Australia is framed in deficit (COAG 2016, Fforde et al. 2013). The national mantra of ‘closing the gap’ embeds deficit mindsets in educators and education systems that participants in this study described as deeply disempowering. Data here indicate that deficit discourse had a dual impact on how schools worked with First Australian students. Rhetoric surrounding Indigenous disadvantage meant that First Australian students were characterised as ‘less than’ or ‘needful of’ by dint of their Indigenous background, irrespective of real need or aptitude. Many participants described feeling resentful at having unsolicited help foisted on them, or being placed in the lowest performing classes with no reference to their past academic performance. At the same time, the deficit lens deflected attention from the barriers thrown up by social, cultural and academic issues that were within schools’ power to change.
In terms of policy preferencing boarding school over place-based education (Wilson 2014), this study also has implications. It was clear from their narratives that boarding school did not work for all students. Some people from very remote communities questioned how a Euro-centric education in an affluent non Indigenous setting could ever prepare them for a life in community, although as was usually the case, participants expressed a range of opinions. Whether it was the loss of connection to home; the loss of language, culture and identity; loneliness, homesickness or culture shock; the impact of antecedent trauma; racism; pressure to ‘succeed’; the ‘psychic turmoil’ (hooks 1994, p182), occasioned by feeling lost between worlds; the intersection of all or any of these factors. For some it was just too much. A disturbing number of participants reported that they had attempted suicide or had entertained suicidal thoughts. These findings indicate that work currently being undertaken by McCalman and colleagues (2016), to develop a multi-component mentoring intervention to improve resilience and modify suicide risk for remote Indigenous Australian students at boarding school, will make a welcome contribution to protecting young people. They also establish the importance of maintaining quality place-based education for secondary aged First Australian young people wherever they come from.

It was a recurring concern for people living in urban settings that schools and scholarship providers often overlook their children. These participants felt their young ones would benefit greatly from attending high-performing independent schools, but the cost of attending those schools was prohibitive. They expressed consternation and sometimes dismay that students from remote areas were seen as better candidates for urban scholarship programs, when they perceived that the level of need in their own community was just as high.

Practice

Much of the discourse surrounding Indigenous education in Australia focuses on investing young people with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in mainstream institutions. This research indicates that a collateral focus on the cultural safety of those institutions is also warranted. While in some parts of Australia, programs have been developed to address the knowledge deficit amongst practicing teachers, and to facilitate
an integrated and bi-cultural support for students, this is not consistent across the nation, and much remains to be done.

- **Opportunities for further research**

This research reveals gaps in knowledge that provide further research opportunities. These include life-span studies to understand how different tiers of education work together; wide-scale quantitative studies to establish patterns of behaviour, and to better understand the impact of mainstream boarding education on language and cultural traditions; academically rigorous, and critically informed, ethnographic research on boarding programs so that ‘best practice’ might be correctly identified.

Education is cited as one of the social determinants of Indigenous health, but the reciprocal relationship between improvements in health and education outcomes of Indigenous Australians is not well understood (Anderson 2007). Racism, trauma and social connectedness are all social issues that have been identified as determinant of Indigenous health outcomes. This research establishes that as well as being determinants of health, these issues were fundamentally important to the education success of participants in this research project. It has established that when schools engaged authentically and proactively with these issues they assisted First Australian young people to maximise the benefits they derive from education. One participant put it like this:

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Land, language, culture, and they’re the cornerstones, they’re the fundamentals of Aboriginal life, and you can’t disregard that, but you don’t use that not to progress… So whatever you build, [you’ve] … got to work within that framework… Land, language, culture and identity… That captures the essence of an Aboriginal person. So when you become a doctor, you become a doctor, you’re not becoming a white man.
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[P3, remote]

Land, language, culture and identity don’t just happen in mainstream Australian boarding schools. They require a concerted effort and commitment from schools to work closely with families and communities, whatever their circumstances, so that home and school-based support systems mesh together and become mutually reinforcing. They require recognition of the prevalence and various manifestations of racism and a zero-tolerance
policy towards it, and this includes refusing to accept deficit mindsets. They require a commitment to embedding First Australian voices in the school, so that young people are empowered to find strength and courage and dignity and the outlines of an imagined future within their own cultural heritage.


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Appendix A

Ethics Approval

21 May 2014

A/Prof D.G. Beckett
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne

Dear A/Prof Beckett

I am pleased to advise that the Humanities and Applied Sciences Human Ethics Sub-Committee approved the following Project:

Project title: How does attending an independent or Catholic boarding school in Victoria shape outcomes for Indigenous youth?
Researchers: A/Prof D.G. Beckett, A/Prof C.J. Freemantle, Prof M.L. Langton, M. O’Bryan
Ethics ID: 1442048

The Project has been approved for the period: 15-May-2014 to 31-Dec-2014 subject to your provision of a copy of an endorsement by the traditional elders/Land Council, most relevant to your proposed research, prior to your commencing your empirical work. (The endorsement(s) can be forwarded to me as a hard copy or scanned and sent to me as an email.) The HAPSC Committee also requested that liaison with Professor Langton be maintained, as appropriate, at all times.

It is your responsibility to ensure that all people associated with the Project are made aware of what has actually been approved.

Research projects are normally approved to 31 December of the year of approval. Projects may be renewed yearly for up to a total of five years upon receipt of a satisfactory annual report. If a project is to continue beyond five years a new application will normally need to be submitted.

Please note that the following conditions apply to your approval. Failure to abide by these conditions may result in suspension or discontinuation of approval and/or disciplinary action.

(a) Limit of Approval: Approval is limited strictly to the research as submitted in your Project application.

(b) Variation to Project: Any subsequent variations or modifications you might wish to make to the Project must be notified formally to the Human Ethics Sub-Committee for further consideration and approval. If the Sub-Committee considers that the proposed changes are significant, you may be required to submit a new application for approval of the revised Project.

(c) Incidents or adverse affects: Researchers must report immediately to the Sub-Committee anything which might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol including adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the Project. Failure to do so may result in suspension or cancellation of approval.

(d) Monitoring: All projects are subject to monitoring at any time by the Human Research Ethics Committee.

(e) Annual Report: Please be aware that the Human Research Ethics Committee requires that researchers submit an annual report on each of their projects at the end of the year, or at the conclusion of a project if it continues for less than this time. Failure to submit an annual report will mean that ethics approval will lapse.

(f) Auditing: All projects may be subject to audit by members of the Sub-Committee.

If you have any queries on these matters, or require additional information, please contact me using the details below.

Please quote the ethics registration number and the title of the Project in any future correspondence.

On behalf of the Sub-Committee I wish you well in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Jackie Adams
Humanities and Applied Sciences HESC
Phone: 83414274, Email: jsa@unimelb.edu.au

cc: HEAG Chair - Melbourne Graduate School of Education

The Office for Research Ethics and Integrity
The University of Melbourne, Level 1, 790 Elizabeth St Melbourne Victoria 3010 Australia
T: +61 3 8341 9867
W: www.orei.unimelb.edu.au
Dear ______________,

I am writing to invite you to be part of a study that we are doing into the experiences of young Indigenous people who spent time studying in boarding schools in Victoria.

Should you agree to participate, you would be asked to take part in an interview where I would ask you to tell me about the things you liked about the experience and the things that made you unhappy. I would also like you to tell me about what you have done since you left boarding school.

While big schools offer all sorts of opportunities, leaving home is often hard, and boarding school can be a difficult place to be. In addition to interviewing you, with your permission I would also like to talk with either a family member or someone you nominate from your home community, to learn about how they felt about you attending boarding school. I am hoping that by hearing of your experiences, and those of other young people and their families, schools might be better equipped to meet the needs of future students, their families and communities.

I am inviting approximately 20 young people who have left school, and where appropriate also a parent or community member who has known them for a long time, to participate in a semi-structured interview (in person or via phone or Skype if you would prefer). Interviews will last for about an hour and with your permission, your interview will be digitally recorded and then typed out so that your opinions can be represented accurately. When the recording has been transcribed, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript, so that you can check the information is correct and/or request deletions. We estimate that the time commitment required of you would not exceed 30 minutes.
How my confidentiality will be protected?
You will be asked to describe but not name both your school and your home community, and you will only ever be referred to by a code so that your identity is kept secret as much as possible. Names and details of all participants will be kept in a password-protected electronic file separately from the rest of the research data and materials. I will be the only person to have access to this information. In any publications and presentations based on this research you will only be referred to by an ID number or in a general way. Other information that may help identify you (such as where you are from, what school you went to) will be removed. You should note, however, that because the number of people participating in this research is relatively small, there is still a small chance that someone may be able to identify you. All data relevant to this project will be kept for at least five years after the publication of project results. After this period, if there is no further use for the data, all data will be destroyed.

What are the benefits of the research?
This research will help schools to understand better the way they look after Indigenous students, and help them to support boarding students better. It will also help schools and scholarship providers to understand which kids benefit most from scholarships and what support they need after they leave school.

What are the possible risks and how do we plan to minimise them?
If you experienced difficulties during your time at school, talking about these experiences might be distressing for you. If this were to occur, the interview would be immediately stopped and would only be resumed with your permission, possibly on another day. In any case, you are completely free to withdraw from the interview at any time, and/or to have your interview deleted from the records.

How will I receive feedback?
If you wish to provide further feedback to us, we can send you a transcript of your interview. You will then have two weeks to get back to us with anything you might like to change or delete. After this time I will assume that I am able to draw on the edited transcript for this research. On the consent form (or at any later time) you can also request copies of the project report or paper be sent to you.

Will participation in this project prejudice me in any way?
All information received from you will be strictly anonymous and will not be used without your consent. This research is completely independent and your opinion will be treated as valid and important, whatever your perspective. Participation in this research is voluntary and participants are free to withdraw at any moment. It is also your right to request to withdraw all unprocessed data that was supplied by you without prejudice.

Where can I get further information?
If you have any questions or concerns or require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact Marnie O’Brien on the numbers provided above. Should you have concerns regarding the conduct of the research please contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee and Health Sciences HESC, The University of Melbourne, VIC 3010. Tel: (03) 8344 2073.
How do I agree to participate?
If you would like to take part in this research project, please indicate that you have read and understood this information by signing the accompanying Consent Form.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME
Yours sincerely,
Marnie O’Bryan
Dear ________________,

I am writing to invite you to be part of a study that we are doing into the experiences of young Indigenous people who spent time studying in boarding schools in Victoria.

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to contribute by participating in a focus group discussion with approximately 4-6 other young people and/or community members. The discussion will assist us in putting together a picture of what the boarding school experience is like for Indigenous students and their families and how they feel it impacts post-school choices. I would like to to listen to your stories and learn about how you reflect on your time in boarding school and how it has contributed to choices you have made and things you have done in your adult life. While big schools offer all sorts of opportunities, leaving home is often hard, and boarding school can be a difficult place to be. In addition to participating in this focus group discussion, with your permission I would also like to talk with either a family member or someone you think would be appropriate from your home community, to learn about how they found the experience. I am hoping that by hearing of your experiences, and those of other young people, schools might be better equipped to meet the needs of future students, their families and communities.

Focus group discussions will last for about an hour and with your permission, will be audio and video recorded and then typed out so that each person’s opinions can be represented accurately. When the recording has been transcribed, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript, so that you can check the information is correct and/or request deletions.

How my confidentiality will be protected?
You will be asked to describe but not name both your school and your home community, and you will only ever be referred to by a code so that your identity is kept secret as much as possible. Names and details of all participants will be kept in a
password-protected electronic file separately from the rest of the research data and materials. I will be the only person to have access to this information. In any publications and presentations based on this research you will only be referred to by an ID number or in a general way. Other potentially identifying information (such as where you are from, what school you went to) will be removed. You should note, however, that because the number of people participating in this research is relatively small, there is still a small chance that someone may be able to identify you. All data relevant to this project will be kept for at least five years after the publication of project results. After this period, if there is no further use for the data, all data will be destroyed.

**What are the possible risks and how do we plan to minimise them?**

If you experienced difficulties during your time at school, talking about these experiences might be distressing for you. If this occurs, the discussion will be immediately stopped and will only be resumed with your permission. In any case, you are completely free to withdraw from the discussion group at any time, and/or to have your contributions deleted from the records.

**How will I receive feedback?**

If you wish to provide further feedback to us, I can send you a transcript of the focus group discussion. You will then have two weeks to get back to me with anything you might like to change or delete. After this time I will assume that I am able to draw on the edited transcript for this research. On the consent form (or at any later time) you can also request copies of the project report or paper be sent to you.

**Will participation in this project prejudice me in any way?**

All information received from you will be strictly anonymous and will not be used without your consent. This research is completely independent and your opinion will be treated as valid and important, whatever your perspective. Participation in this research is voluntary and participants are free to withdraw at any moment. It is also your right to request to withdraw all unprocessed data that was supplied by you without prejudice.

**Where can I get further information?**

If you have any questions or concerns or require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact Marnie O’Bryan, or any of the other people named, on the numbers provided above. Should you have concerns regarding the conduct of the research please contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee and Health Sciences HESC, The University of Melbourne, VIC 3010. Tel: (03) 8344 2073.

**How do I agree to participate?**

If you would like to take part in this research project, please indicate that you have read and understood this information by signing the accompanying Consent Form.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME**

Yours sincerely,

Marnie O’Bryan
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: *How does the experience of attending boarding school in Victoria shape outcomes for Indigenous youth?*

**A/Prof David Beckett**
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**Marnie O’Bryan**
EdD Candidate,
Melbourne Graduate School of Education,
The University of Melbourne, 3010
M: 0408 154 555
obryan.marnie@gmail.com

**INFORMED CONSENT**

I understand what this project is about. I have read [or had read to me] the Plain English Research Statement which explains what this research project is about and I understand it.

I have had a chance to ask questions about the project, and I am comfortable with the answers that I have been given. I know that I can ask more questions whenever I like.

I know that I do not have to participate in this research if I don’t want to. I know that I don’t have to answer any questions I don’t like.

The researcher will not write anything down unless I agree that she can.

The researcher will turn off the tape if I ask her to.

If I want to stop participating I know that I can pull out at any time without getting into trouble with the researcher or anyone else.

If I pull out, the researcher will be allowed to use any information that I have given her before then, and she will be able to write down that I have stopped participating. But they won’t be able to make me keep participating if I don’t want to.
I agree that the researcher can interview me for the research and write down what I say.

OR: I agree to talk about questions which the researcher gives us in a group of people. This is called a ‘focus group’. I agree that the focus group can be taped and that the researcher can sit in and take notes, explain conditions of focus group, etc.

I understand that there will be a preliminary interview of about 30 minutes, followed by the research interview that will take about an hour/a group discussion will be held [when, where] and will take about [time - how long].

I understand that I will not be paid for my involvement in this study.

I understand that the research may have the benefit of helping schools to understand better the way they look after Indigenous students, and help them to support Indigenous boarding students better. It will also help schools and scholarship providers to understand which kids benefit most from scholarships and what support they need after they leave school.

I know if I experienced difficulties during my time at school, talking about these experiences might be distressing for me. If this were to occur, the interview would be immediately stopped and would only be started again with my permission, possibly on another day. If I am taking part in a Focus Group discussion I can withdraw from the group but I understand that things I have said up to that point might have to remain on the record.

I understand that if I tell the researcher about drugs I took, or other illegal things the police might be able to force the researcher to dub on me.

[FOCUS GROUP] While the researcher will ask other people in the group not to discuss focus group business outside the group, they may not be able to stop them doing that.

I understand that the researcher wants to write about the research in a study for Melbourne University. She may also write articles or present papers at conferences talking about the role of boarding schools for young Indigenous people.

I understand that my name will NOT be mentioned in any articles or talks that come out of this research, and that people won’t know who I am from reading articles or listening to talks. The researcher will just call me a number of fake names, like everyone else who participates in the research.

The researcher will keep a record of what I said during the research with a code, which could be used to identify me. She will keep it in a locked filing cabinet in her office at Melbourne University or in a secure location on a computer. After five years the researcher will destroy this record.

I know that if I am worried about the research project, I can ring up the researcher on her mobile phone number and talk to her about it. I can also ring any of the other people named above.
I know that I can also complain to the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee and Health Sciences HESC, The University of Melbourne, VIC 3010. Tel: (03) 8344 2073.

I have read this Informed Consent Form and I agree with it.

Signed by the research participant_____________________________________________

Name of the research participant____________________________

Date___________________________________

OR

I read this Informed Consent Form aloud to [name of research participant] and I believe that s/he understood and agreed to it:

Signed by witness_______________________________________________________

Name of witness___________________________________________________________

Date_______________________________________________

AND: Signed by or on behalf of the researcher:

Name_________________________________________________________________

Date_____________________________________________
Appendix E

Interview/Focus Group questions

The following list of questions were submitted as part of the Ethics process at University of Melbourne. Not all of these questions were asked in every interview, and conversations followed a looser, more informal ‘yarning’ style (Bessarab & Ng’andu 2010). Although most interviews lasted approximately 1 hour, some were much longer. A number of participants requested follow-up interviews which taken together amounted to several hours. In focus group discussions, the conversation flowed naturally and my role became one of clarifying or probing statements rather than directing the discussion. Some questions/statements were made in every interview:

- All participants were told that this was an opportunity for them to ‘speak back’ to their school or to policy makers, and tell them what they need to know;
- All participants were asked how boarding school had changed them or their children;
- All participants were asked about their home communities, how they came to attend boarding school and what they sought to achieve through it;
- All participants were asked if they experienced racism at school;
- All participants were asked what happened after they left school.

LIST OF POTENTIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (Submitted as part of the ethics process)

These are a list of potential interview questions to be used when meeting with individuals who have attended boarding schools in Victoria but in keeping with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research guidelines these will be flexible. The interview is expected to last about 60 minutes.

INTRO QUESTIONS:
1. Without naming them, could you describe your home community in general terms as well as the boarding school you attended?
2. Could you explain how you came to attend boarding school?
3. What have you done since you left school?

QUESTIONS:

Theme: Student wellbeing and self-concept at school (physical/emotional/educational/cultural)
1. Is there anything in particular that you would like to talk about in relation to your time at boarding school?
2. What were the things that made you feel happy at school?
3. What were the things that made you feel sad at school?
4. What did you enjoy most about being at boarding school?
5. Where did you most feel you belonged at school? Who did you hang out with?
6. What aspect of school life did you find most challenging?
7. How were you supported at school/in the boarding house?
8. Did you feel the school supported/encouraged/recognised your cultural background? How did they do that and how did you feel about it?
9. Did you ever experience racism at school?

Theme: Academic achievement and self concept

1. Can you remember how it felt going into the classroom at your school?
2. Did things stay like that, or get better or worse?
3. What was your favorite subject and why?
4. What were the things you were good at?
5. How did boarding school change you?

Theme: Understanding the home community

1. How did your family feel about you going away to school?
2. Did anyone from home come to visit you at school, or did anyone from school visit your community? Did you/Would you find this helpful?
3. Did other kids from home go away to boarding school? Are you closer or less close to them than before you went to school?
4. How did your family and friends feel about you when you came home? Do you still hang out with the same friends?
5. Were you able to go home for important events in the community? How important was this to you?
6. How did you feel when it was time to go back to boarding school?

Theme: Finding effective pathways

1. When you first came to school do you remember what you wanted to do/be when you left?
2. Who helped you to work out what you wanted to do after you left school?
3. Did you feel confident about how the system worked?
4. Were you offered any on-going support after you left school? (eg finding places to live/courses to study/traineeships/apprenticeships)?
5. If you went back home, did you find work? If so, what type of work?
6. Do you feel any differently about your family and community after being at boarding school?
7. How is your experience in boarding school relevant to what you are doing now?
8. Have you stayed in contact with many friends from school? How often and by what means do you communicate?

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS:

1. If or when you have your own children, would you want them to go away to boarding school? Why or why not?
2. If not, what would you prefer for them?
3. What else would you like to tell me about being at boarding school?
Appendix F
Participant profiles

Below are the profiles of alumni participant by remoteness, gender, age, education and life outcomes.

Participants by geographic location (n=74)
(as measured using the DoctorConnect locator at http://www.doctorconnect.gov.au/locator)

Participants by demographic (n=74)
Parent participants by gender (n=27)

Alumni participants by gender (n-35)

Alumni Participants by academic outcome (also included in Chapter 12)
Appendix G

Disaggregated data- alumni participants

The following detailed list is provided for ease of reference in contextualising verbatim quotations used in the body of the thesis. The twenty-seven parent/grandparent/community participants, and the children they represent are not included in this list.

A1
Gender: Male
Current Age: 22
Home Community: Very remote
Language background: Creole (Fluent bilingual)
Currently lives: Regional centre
Age at time of commencing boarding school: 16
Education outcomes: Year 12 certificate, no ATAR
School history: Local government school/ 2 years local high school
  - Regional boarding school ‘in the bush’- 2 years
  - Boarding school, Boys’ single sex school. Entry at Yr. 10, Term 4.
Post school education pathway: University, one year. Special entry arrangements
Post-school employment: Unskilled labour

A2
Gender: Male
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: Regional
Language background: English
Currently lives: Regional
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 10/11 (?)
School history: Urban primary
Post school education: University, dropped out during first year
Post-school employment: Currently apprenticed

A3
Gender: Male
Current Age: 22
Home Community: Very remote
Language background: Creole
Currently lives: In home community
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 11
School history: Local primary, regional boarding school Yrs 7-10
Education outcomes: Year 12 certificate, no ATAR
Post school education: Nil
Post-school employment: At home, fishing

A4
Gender: Male
Current Age: 20
Home Community: Regional Town
Language background: English
Currently lives: Urban
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 10
School history: Local state primary and high schools
Education outcomes: Year 12 certificate, no ATAR
Post school education: Traineeship (not completed)
Post-school employment: in schools

A5
Gender: Male
Current Age: 20
Home Community: Regional town
Language background: English
Currently lives: (different) regional town
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 10, 16 years
School history: Attended school in regional town
Education outcomes: Year 12 certificate, no ATAR
Post school education: traineeship with corporate
Post-school employment: traineeship full time for one year, later employed as casual part time

A6
Gender: Female
Current Age: Approx 30
Home Community: Very remote
Language background: Fluent Bilingual
Currently lives: Regional centre
Age at time of commencing boarding school: 17, year 11
Education outcomes: Yr 12, no ATAR
School history: 16 schools all over Australia
Post school education: 1 year teaching degree, regional college
Post-school employment: Various

A7
Gender: Female
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: Remote NT, population approx. 1200
Language background: Fluent Bilingual
Currently lives: City
Age at time of commencing boarding school: 16
School history: Pre-school – Yr.9 – school in community
- Yrs. 10, 11, 12 Single sex girls’ boarding school, outer metro.
Education outcomes: ungraded Year 12 certificate, no ATAR
Post school education: TAFE courses
Post-school employment: Teaching assistant roles, youth work, painting

A8
Gender: Male
Current Age: mid 20s
Home Community: Remote community, NT
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: in community
Age at time of commencing boarding school: 16
School history: Grew up between parents’ two very remote communities, primary years in community, bilingual; attended regional boarding school for 4 years. Spent years 10,11,12 at an elite school down south.
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12, attained ATAR, offered special entry to Go8 university
Post school education: Returned to community immediately after school, fathered one child. Completed Certificate courses in Sport and Recreation; Business Management;
Post-school employment: various

A9
Gender: Male
Current Age: 50s
Home Community: very remote
Language background: Other than English (speaks several languages)
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 9/10 (?), stayed less than one year
School history: on country then boarding school ‘down south’
Education outcomes: left prior to Year 12
Post school education: Education qualifications gained in later life through regional college
Post-school employment: various, including school teacher, school principal, Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP).

A10
Gender: Male
Current Age: 40s
Home Community: Very remote
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: Very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7
School history: Local bi-lingual school
Education outcomes: Did not complete Year 12
Post school education: Yes, through regional college, later in life
Post-school employment: As teacher, school leader

A11
Gender: Male
Current Age: late 30s (?)

25 The Group of Eight (Go8) is a coalition of research-intensive Australian universities. The Go8 universities are some of the largest and the oldest universities in Australia. Several Go8 universities, along with the University of Tasmania, are called the Sandstone or Brick universities.

26 The CDEP scheme was an Indigenous-specific program that enabled an Indigenous community or organisation to pool the unemployment benefit entitlements of individuals into direct wages for those people who chose to participate in local employment in various community development or organisation programs as an alternative to receiving individual income support payments (ABS 2011). There is an ongoing debate about whether CDEP should be classified as paid employment for statistical purposes (Gray, Lohoar & Hunter 2012).
Home Community: Very remote
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7
School history: Local primary, regional boarding
Education outcomes: Did not complete Year 12
Post school education: Certificate courses
Post-school employment: Yes, includes professional sport

A12
Gender: Female
Current Age: 23ish
Home Community: Very remote community
Language background: English
Currently lives: Capital city in home state
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 9
School history: Remote school
Post school education: GO8 university interstate, bachelor degree, Masters at home state university
Post-school employment: Still student

A13
Gender: Female
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: remote
Language background: Aboriginal English
Currently lives: City
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Yr 7, age 13
School history: Local primary
Education outcomes: Completed Yr 12 with ATAR
Post school education: Mainstream entry, degree course (completed) at Go8 university.
Post-school employment: Recently graduated

A14
Gender: Male
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: very remote
Language background: Aboriginal English
Currently lives: Studying in city, ‘home’ still remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: 14
School history: Very remote, remote primary schools
Education outcomes: Completed Yr 12 with ATAR
Post school education: Special entry to degree course, Go8 University
Post-school employment: student

A15
Gender: Female
Current Age: 23
Home Community: Remote
Language background: English
Currently lives: City
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 10 after month-long exchange
School history: Local school (excelling)
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12 with ATAR
Post school education: University, changed course after 1 year, completed 6 months of different course, currently deferred
Post-school employment: Working with Aboriginal kids in role-model capacity through local organisation

A16
Gender: Male
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: very remote
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7 (no local school)
School history: local primary school in community- taught in English
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12, no ATAR
Post school education: Nil
Post-school employment: CDEP

A17
Gender: Male
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: very remote
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7 (no local school)
School history: local primary school in community- taught in English
Education outcomes: Did not complete Yr 12
Post school education: Nil
Post-school employment: CDEP

A18
Gender: Male
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: very remote
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7 (no local school)
School history: local primary school in community- taught in English
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12, no ATAR
Post school education: Nil
Post-school employment: CDEP

A19
Gender: Male
Current Age: 21
Home Community: Remote WA
Language background: Local language but primary education in English.
Currently lives: Perth/home community
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Yr. 9
School history: Educated in a private (Catholic) school in the local community, reported that there was ‘no gap’ when he came to boarding school even though he had anticipated being behind other students. 
Post school education: Currently in 3rd year of BA at UWA, aiming to study post grad Law next year. 
Post-school employment: N/A

A20
Gender: Female
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: Urban
Language background: English
Currently lives: Urban
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7/8 (?) 
School history: State primary school, selected by mum for the standard of education
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12
Post school education: Degree course in nursing
Post-school employment: yes

A20
Gender: Female
Current Age: 20s
Home Community: Urban
Language background: English
Currently lives: Urban
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 10/11 (?) 
School history: State primary school, local Catholic secondary
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12 with ATAR, entry to Go8 university
Post school education: Degree course in science followed by post grad medicine
Post-school employment: as a doctor

A22
Gender: Female
Current Age: 21
Home Community: remote
Language background: English
Currently lives: remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7 
School history: Local primary, boarding school from Year 7, expelled after one year, sent interstate (no warning)
Education outcomes: Year 12, ATAR
Post school education: University, special access scheme. Dropped out after one year.
Post-school employment: At local school- TA.

A23
Gender: Female
Current Age: 21
Home Community: very remote
Language background: English
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7 
School history: Local primary, boarding school from Year 7, expelled after one year, sent interstate (no warning)
Education outcomes: Year 12, no ATAR
Post school education: University, special access scheme. Dropped out after one year.
Post-school employment: Full time mum

A24
Gender: Male
Current Age: Late 20s
Home Community: Grew up in regional centre, strong family connection to land
Language background: English- ‘I don’t speak it fluently, but I know a little bit, and I can understand conversation’ (p6)
Currently lives: Melbourne
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Yr12
School history: Mainstream high school, Darwin
Post school education: Currently finishing Teacher training, has already completed undergrad degree
Post-school employment: Worked as mentor to Aboriginal kids at his previous school, now works with not for profit organisation.

A25
Gender: Male
Current Age: late 20s
Home Community: very remote
Language background: English
Currently lives: Remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 10
School history: Local Catholic school to Year 10
Education outcomes: Dropped out Year 11, returned home, Year 12 at local school
Post school education: Apprenticeship
Post-school employment: Full time

A26
Gender: Female
Current Age: 20
Home Community: very remote
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 11
School history: Local primary (bi-lingual), urban boarding school for Year 11, local boarding school Yr 12
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12, no ATAR
Post school education: Certificate courses

A26
Gender: Female
Current Age: 20
Home Community: very remote
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 11
School history: Local primary (bi-lingual), urban boarding school for Year 11, local boarding school Yr 12
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12, no ATAR
Post school education: Certificate courses

A28
Gender: Male  
Current Age: 20s  
Home Community: Urban  
Language background: English  
Currently lives: Urban  
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7  
School history: Local primary  
Education outcomes: Completed Yr 12 with ATAR.  
Post school education: Special entry to Go8 uni, completed degree course, accepted for Masters at performing arts college

A29  
Gender: Female  
Current Age: 20s  
Home Community: remote  
Language background: English  
Currently lives: urban  
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7, 13 years old  
School history: Local primary, series of boarding schools for secondary education, one year overseas with family.  
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12, attained ATAR and mainstream access to university  
Post school education: Completed degree course at university  
Post-school employment: Film making

A30  
Gender: Male  
Current Age: 19  
Home Community: very remote  
Language background: Creole  
Currently lives: Regional centre  
Age at time of commencing boarding school: ?  
School history: Local very remote primary, local boarding school, boarding in regional centre  
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12  
Post school education: Began university, dropped out first year, re-enrolled in regional university

A31  
Gender: Male  
Current Age: 40s  
Home Community: Regional  
Language background: English  
Currently lives: Urban  
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 10  
School history: Local primary, secondary, transitional year in Aboriginal boarding school then mainstream boarding school Yrs 11 & 12  
Education outcomes: Completed Year 12, no ATAR  
Post school education: Certificate courses: ‘I’ve done some study, went back to uni for a bit, done some short courses, so I’ve been behind’ (p9)  
Post-school employment: Various, including community leadership roles

A32  
Gender: Male
Current Age: 22
Home Community: Regional
Language background: English
Currently lives: outer urban
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 7, age 13
School history: Local primary, boarding school Yr 7-12
Education outcomes: Dropped out of school term 1 Year 12, did not complete
Post school education: Certificate courses

A33
Gender: Male
Current Age: 20
Home Community: regional
Language background: English
Currently lives: Studying in city university
Age at time of commencing boarding school: Year 10
School history: Regional primary/secondary
Education outcomes: Left boarding school during Year 12, completed Year 12 at home, attained ATAR, special access to university
Post school education: Degree course
Post-school employment: Yes- full time until course began

A34
Gender: Female
Current Age: 20
Home Community: very remote
Language background: Speaks 4 languages, understands 6. First language not English
Currently lives: very remote
Age at time of commencing boarding school: 12
School history: Outstation, school of the air, very remote primary, Aboriginal boarding school Yr 7-10, mainstream boarding Yrs 10-12
Education outcomes: Completed ungraded Year 12, no ATAR
Post school education: Completed school 2016

A35
Gender: Male
Current Age: 60s
Home Community: Original community remote
Language background: English
Currently lives: Urban
Age at time of commencing boarding school: ?
School history: Local primary, regional boarding
Education outcomes: Excelled academically, Year 12 cum laude
Post school education: University also cum laude
Appendix H

Sample transcript

The transcript of interview reproduced here is included as an example of the interviews conducted for this study. Each was conducted in the same semi-structured style as this, giving maximum opportunity for participants to raise issues of concern for them. All interviews were recorded with permission, and transcribed as follows by Karin Robin, to whom I am enduringly grateful. On receiving the transcript, I would re-listen to the interview, correct errors and where possible fill in words that Karin had been unable to decipher. Interviews would then be de-identified prior to being analysed. This interview and those with other key informants were discussed at length with a colleague whose research interests broadly align with my own. In some instances, interviewees had requested to read the transcript and they were sent to them for approval. This interviewee has given express approval that the verbatim transcript be included here.

INTERVIEW – A20 12 Feb 2015

R So my study is on the experience of indigenous kids in boarding schools, and I’m basically saying ... the reason I’m doing the study is so that boarding schools can understand the experience of kids as they’ve lived it – the good, the bad and the ugly

A20 Yeah

R and basically I want to hear whatever you want to tell me about boarding school

A20 Okay. So you won’t ask me questions, you want me to just...?

R I’m happy for you just to talk, or I’ll ask you questions.

A20 Would you mind asking me a few questions?

R Yeah absolutely. So can you tell me a little bit about where you come from
A20 Yeah so I’m [People Group] – I was always brought up to say that because I live in [People Group] land, I’m [People Group] first and foremost

R Yeah

A20 So I’m [People Group], my [People Group] side is C. and F. – my dad’s a C. and my mum’s an F. and then my dad’s dad was from up north. So my [People Group] side is all down [region], and my dad’s side was [People Group], they’re [People Group], so they’re from like [region] way. Yeah.

R Yeah. So tell me about your schooling from when you were little, where did you go to school?

A20 So I started out, my mum and dad are separated and they have been since I was a little girl, so I’ve lived with my mum predominantly and we lived in T. and I went to school up until about Year 2, [local] Primary, just the local government school, and then mum made a conscious decision to move to [different area] because, not that I would have any recollection of it, but as I’ve grown up she’s informed that there was a lot of racism in that school, even though the majority of the kids were indigenous. So we moved to [different area] and she put me in another public school called C. I was probably one of maybe four indigenous kids, including my brother and two other indigenous people. Anyway, I was in Year 7 and it was like fate, I got this letter from one of the admin ladies who kind of just handed me this form and it was an application for a bursary from [boarding school]. So I filled that all out and ...

R Were you keen to go?

A20 At the time, no. I think the scariest thing was that it was all girls

R Yes
And I had this pre-assumption that all girls, you know, like it was completely foreign the idea to me, and being a young girl I thought, my God, I’m not going to socialise with any boys, it’s not my cup of tea, oh my God

But you still filled it out?

I still filled it out. A lot of it was my mum that kind of pushed... just for the opportunity she always was like to me – it’s better just to put it in, and if you’re accepted, you know then make the decision whether you want to go or not. Don’t say no I’m not going and not apply. So we did apply, and it was I think, if memory serves me correct, she filled out the application and you had to hand in a statement why you wanted to go, why you thought you should be chosen to go to [boarding school] and what you bring to the college. I actually have my letter, I found the letter that I wrote, I should put it in

Wow

Yeah, I read it the other day and it brought me to tears some of it

If you were happy, I would love you to scan it... yeah

Yeah, I’ll get L to give me your email address

I’ll give you a letter that’s got it on it

Yeah, I would be more than happy to send it to you

Yeah fantastic because I’m interested to know what kind of characteristics you think you were chosen for

Yeah, and I can honestly say that the work was 100% mine, like we had to hand in this, and then you did a poster, and I think mum really directed or guided me, I should say, to how I should do my poster
because being a twelve year girl, I think I drew ... like it was really colourful and pretty, and mum kind of helped me to see – alright, this is beautiful, but she was like – why don’t we do something that incorporates the college and your Aboriginality? So I remember doing a poster of cut-outs of [boarding school] girls in uniforms and things about the college, and then cutting out pictures of indigenous people, and like putting them alongside that. And I think that was something that definitely stood out for them because that’s something that [boarding school] was looking for. But yeah, so I’ll definitely fax you the ...

R Yeah, that would be fantastic, yeah thank you

A20 And then from that, the college called you up, you got a letter to say that you’d been accepted and that they’d like you to come for an interview. So we went in for an interview and we got a tour of the college, and then myself and my mum and the principal, […] all sat down, and I think they asked me really similar questions about what I felt I could bring to the college, what I could get from the college, and why me over whoever else was applying, and then they said they’d get back to me. So I was shortlisted, they’d get back to me, and we got a letter to say that I’d been given an opportunity to go

R How did you feel then?

A20 I think secretly I was really, really excited. I think a lot of me resisting to go was the fear of maybe not getting in, and the more that I ... the further I got along the process, the more excited .. you know like I think I let my guard down a little bit and I thought, well actually... and I think one thing that helped was I had my mum there all the time and she was really supportive

R Does she live in [Capital City]?
Yeah. So both my parents, well my dad lives up north now on the mines, but all my family, the majority of them, are based in [Capital City].

Was this a boarding position at [boarding school]?

Yes, so the bursary covered your tuition costs and boarding and ..

So why would you want to board if mum lived in [Capital City]?

A lot of it was the transport

yeah

So in the end I was a boarder in Year 8, and mum and the head boarding mistress, Miss R, made a conscious decision to pull me out at the end of Year 8 because I was a little bit naughty, and I use that term very lightly because I don’t think I was any naughtier than any other child in there, but ... yeah, so ...

So why were you pulled out if you weren’t naughtier than any other girls?

So yeah. I boarded in Year 8, and maybe about second semester there were... I became friends with a girl called G.E., who was also an Indigenous girl but she was in the year above me, and something that I’m very much aware of at [boarding school] now, going back and doing boarding again in Year 12, and I’ve just started going back and doing some mentoring, literally like just my second week for the [boarding school] Indigenous girls now – I think one thing they lack is cultural insight, and I think the way that they perceive Indigenous girls grouping together as a way of coping, being in an all-white you know environment, they see that as you know like segregation, as in we’re going against why they’re bringing us here to help us, to provide us with a beautiful education... like with a great education, and ample opportunity, but we’re not really willing to
come out and socialise. That’s how they see it. I think it’s … like I said, lack of cultural insight

R And can you explain it from your perspective?

A20 So why I hung out with G?

R Yeah

A20 Even though… like even though I’ve been very … like my mum’s Aboriginal but she’s fair skinned, a lot of my cousins, they’re indigenous but I’ve not grown up… I’ve had a really mixed… I’ve got a mixed family, most of my cousins are Hare Krishna, my sister’s mum’s Greek, you know, and so it wasn’t that foreign to me to be amongst non Indigenous people. But to come to a school that was so formal and you have rules and regulations that you had to follow, it was almost … it was relaxing being around other Indigenous girls because I could just be myself. We all had this like … we were just so much… like my vocabulary didn’t have to be formal, it was colloquial, we could talk a bit of [language] even though G wasn’t … she wasn’t [local people group] you know because she’d lived here … she could use some of those words, and it just makes all that difference to be able to communicate in a different way, and especially as a young child, I found it hard to try and conform to the way that they wanted me to express myself. So to be with G, it was kind of like coming home after a hard day at work, and just being able to relax and think, wow I can really be myself. But because I was a boarder, really no pun intended, because I was living there and so I could never come home and be like wow, I can relax. So being with G, it was comfortable, and I think for her as well, we bonded and created a friendship so quickly because she felt like that, and it was like two people being vulnerable, we just automatically kind of attached to one another

R Can you explain your vulnerability?
I think a lot of prejudice and racism, a lot of tolerance to behaviour because we’re black, because a lot of the.... there was no teacher, no housemother that was Indigenous, and, in all fairness to them, I think it was an overwhelming experience for someone that had never had any experience with Indigenous people to come and have to know that there’s certain cultural needs that you need to meet, but not have been taught that, and like I think what I’m trying to say is – rather than seeing us as Year 8s or year 8 girls like the rest of the year group that we were in or the boarding girls, it was like we’re Indigenous. So they knew that they had to... it’s like ... do you understand what I’m trying to say? It was almost like an ignorant point of view that they knew that they had to provide us with cultural care, but they didn’t see it like – okay, how can we actually facilitate things for you here? It wasn’t like that, it was like – okay, you’re Aboriginal, that’s how I see you. You must be really homesick. You must be feeling like this. Your family home... you live up here... they just missed that whole cultural dynamic. It was more just you know we’re all away from home and missing our family, but I’ve never had to deal with an Aboriginal person, and I’ve heard that you guys can really miss your families, but I’m not sure how I deal with that. And yeah...

Presumably it wouldn’t be that hard for you to get family support if they’re [local people group]] people, so they’re around [Capital City]. It wouldn’t have been a difficult thing for the boarding house or... ?

No, that’s something that I thought because I felt that I really struggled with boarding for the first ... for the whole semester I actually rang my mum every day and was like can you please come and have dinner with me? And I felt I was really fortunate because she was right there, and a lot of the other girls that I know that were really homesick, well they would just get a phone call, and as well something that like you know we have phone curfew, so we can’t have our phones during prep, and we can’t have our phones after 9 o’clock when we’re meant to be in bed, and that’s really hard, and I understand that’s rules that we need to follow, but not just about me,
but some of the girls that I’m tutoring in ... not tutoring... trying to mentor and be a liaison person for them, often speak of not being able to contact their family, and I think something that they don’t understand is there’s different dynamics. We’re not calling our family because we are homesick... we’re not only just homesick, but some of us actually have different relationships with our parents, like our kinship is stronger and different in many ways, and you know if you come from a family who suffer from drug abuse or alcoholism or family violence, and you’ve spoken to your mum before prep, or you can tell that something’s up you know, you’re having to quickly try and understand what’s going on and feeling that pain of not being able to be there, and thinking okay, what’s going on, what do I do, because you play such a bigger role. You’re not the child where your parents are going to take care of you, there’s a whole different dynamic to indigenous families, and I’m talking you know like ... I’m not trying to discriminate. I know people are different, but predominantly there’s different dynamics. Like my sisters – I’m not their mother, but when they were brought up I was like their mother. Like my step mum was never not you know their mother, but I was taking care of them, changing nappies, carrying them, helping her out – that’s just the role I played. So if I was to ever get a phone call up and it was something you know that really that was distraught... that I was distraught about and I had to kind of hang up my phone because the housemothers needed it, it’s beyond distressing. And I’m sure a lot of the non indigenous girls went through that. But a lot of the time you’re bringing through these families from communities, and I’m obviously stepping away from me being [local people group] here, but you’re taking people away from communities who suffer a lot of that, and it’s so frustrating to try and explain that. Like that is their only connection to family, and we’re not talking about someone, probably I’m saying the same thing, but we’re not talking about a daughter who has come from a farm and both her parents have an alright relationship and they’re calling up and like yeah, this is what’s wrong, but it’s alright, it’s fine darling, don’t worry. You know some indigenous families, these girls are getting calls up and they are just as much as the support person
as their mother or their cousin or their aunty or their uncle, and it is really like emotionally burdensome

R

Do you think the school understood that at all?

A20

No, not at all, not at all, and that’s why I think I was quite fortunate to be [local people group], to actually have my mum here and to be like mum I can’t do this, I really need you to come and pick me up, or please come and have dinner with me, I’m finding it really hard, or blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, but in saying that, I was thinking about what I would say to you about being a [local people group] person coming to school in a [traditional land], which is like the land, and I think there’s different problems to indigenous students coming from remote areas down, but there are still issues with [local people group] people. I think often people completely disregard the issues that [local people group] students get in boarding because it’s covered with this veil of ignorance that, why would you have issues if this is where your family are? You know you have everything here. If you want to call your mum up, or if you want to go home on the weekend you can, but just how I explained to you before, you know when you get a call up and it’s a distressing call from your family. Like in a sense, a good way, and I think what boarding really provides and you see this in students that come out of boarding is they’re actually detached from that environment, and even though it’s really distressing, and I’m not trying to take away that emotion or that pain or whatever, that’s why boarding is seen in a really good light sometimes because you’re able to escape that environment and think, okay, I’m actually only a child. I don’t need to do this. When your family is here, really even though you’re at a boarding school and you can escape that to a degree, you know you can’t really. Like just how you can think – wow, that’s really, that’s a positive that you can get away from your family, that you can go home when you’re homesick – well if you’re having family problems and you come away from the boarding house, it’s not as easy to get away from those family problems, and that affects you in school and with your relationships and how you may obey the rules, just the
way that it would affect you know an indigenous person from [Remote area 1] or the [Remote Area 2]

R

Yeah

A20

and I think a lot of people don’t actually understand that because, like I said before, it’s like why would you have issues if all your family are here?

R

Can you tell me how it impacts study and about how you felt about yourself going into the classroom? You’re obviously a pretty exceptional person. You obviously were very clear about your own aims and ambitions and what you wanted out of boarding school before you went, as much as a fourteen year old girl can be [laugh]. Can you tell me how you felt when you started at school?

A20

Yeah. So when I started at school, I think it was probably similar to how anyone would feel when they started school – it was daunting, I kind of looked around at all the girls that I was with and thought my God, I don’t think we’re ever going to be friends. I felt really alone, isolated, even though I was amongst all these people. And I can’t really remember in terms of education-wise, but it was quite different the structure. I’d never, you know even though my mum ... she’s always really pushed me to be like – okay if you’ve got homework, you need to do homework, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, but to actually be like, right we wake up at school, we wake up at 8 o’clock... we wake up at 7 o’clock sorry, you go down to breakfast before 8, school starts at 8:30, these are your classes, you come home, you come back up to the boarding house, this is when we have dinner, this is prep time, and I think ... it was all really exciting because I ... I don’t know, I love... I can be really disorganised, so in a sense it was really exciting for me to be like – okay, maybe I need to be told what to do, but at the same time it was, like I said, really daunting to have to conform to something that I’d never, ever really experienced. And I think the same with starting school like classes and things like that,
but I think the only thing would have to be that I had different teachers all the time, like... and I think that's just the same ...

R

About moving to secondary, and it's challenging for a lot of kids

A20

Yeah

R

Did you feel competent and smart in the classroom?

A20

In all honesty, some classes I really do art, crafts and media, and I’d chosen a few electives like that, and I felt really confident in those classes. Even though I enjoy English, I don’t think I was confident, but I felt like I had a really privileged primary school, like the primary school I went to... probably no different to a lot of other government schools, but I felt I got a really good education so that there wasn’t a huge bridge that I had to cross when I went to secondary school

R

Do you think that having that experience at [boarding school] set you up for life in a different way than if you’d gone to another school?

A20

Oh God, definitely. I look back and I am so thankful that I had the opportunity. I am so grateful, and if I could just tell the world, it would literally... it’s not for everyone, but for me, I loved that I was around women, and I think a lot of that actually does come from my Aboriginality. I love being surrounded by women. I love my mum and my nanna. I love having like you know we call it like women’s business you know, I love it, so even though that was probably before I even got accepted, that was one thing that I thought, oh my God, an all girls’ school – but it was so suited to me, and I think it really prevented me from going down a path of promiscuity. I’m not you know... I don’t think I’m any different from any other girl, but seriously, I have friends that were the same age as me that were doing, like having sex, and doing sexual things before my time simply because, even though I... it’s not that I wasn’t looking for it, to be brutally honest, but it was much harder for me to get because I wasn’t surrounded by it. I still did socialise with boys, but it made
it more... it made it less normal so that whenever presented with that opportunity, I didn’t just kind of bite at it, and I think you know it’s so obvious that so many girls suffer with self confidence issues, myself included, and I could tell you right now, if I went to a co-ed school, or if I know that if I had more interaction with males at that age, and a man told me or a boy told me I was beautiful, I’d be head over heels. He could have had sex, done what he wanted with me, and I’d be fine. So I’m so grateful that I went to this all girl school, and I think education-wise, you know like I just completely planned this different life. I think I’ve always been an ambitious person, and like [boarding school]... I can’t explain it, like it’s really set me up for uni, which obviously secondary school try and do to set you up to that next part of your life

R In what way has it set you up for uni? What aspects of it set you up for uni?

A20 Having a really good foundation of like English. You know I think it really expanded my vocabulary to be able to be in that more formal and almost like higher class environment where people were able to express themselves better. And I think it’s really empowered me as an indigenous woman to be able to say – okay, so I’ll learn your way so that I can talk your way, so then what I want to say to you you will understand. So it’s kind of like that it’s actually my agenda or what I’m trying to do when I’m going back to [boarding school] to say okay, for the [boarding school] girls, because I felt like I had no support, like I said from the teachers, and then when we would get liaison officers from the outside in – they would never stay, it was really hard to kind of get to know someone because it takes time, and tell them my problems or kind of open up about what I want, and how... you know what’s upsetting me, and whenever I would do that, they would leave. And it’s not their fault, it was just... it was different funding, different organisations coming in, but I’m really trying to get my foot back in the door at [boarding school] to be like, okay, like I said, this is how you taught me to talk – now I’m going to tell you what we need to start doing here, and actually being what
I didn’t get at school, like I said, not having that stability of that constant person always there, and like building that rapport with them so that I can give it to those girls so that they can hopefully enjoy that experience better than what I did in that kind of regard.

R: That’s fantastic. How has the school responded to you saying that?

A20: Well I haven’t actually... I’m trying to kind of work my way around, like test the waters if you must... it’s like okay... because I...

R: Are they rapt that you’re back to see the girls?

A20: Yeah, so going back to when I got kicked out of boarding school, I was just a bit mischievous with my friend G... long story short, who was also indigenous. However, because I was... my mum lived here, they thought alright, we told you girls off, and it’s not that I wasn’t naughty, I’m not saying... we would sneak out to each other’s rooms, you know once we said we were going to this Christian thing after school when really we snuck over to [Boys’ school] and G saw this boy that she’d been talking to, and then they were worried because they couldn’t find us. That was probably the worst thing that we’d done, and that’s when they decided, okay, no, something needs to be really put in place to separate you two. And because I was [local people group] and G was... G’s parents weren’t here, they were like A20 needs to move out, and because I was on a bursary, I think they really used their in their advantage to be like, you know it is on her contract to apply certain standards... to be at a certain standard, to apply herself and to behave in a certain way that reflects the [boarding school] attitude blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And then when I went back in Year 12 to do [state certificate], so I was a day girl in 9, 10 and 11, I’d kind of worked out how best I could push my limits, if that makes sense, and being Year 12 you get a lot more freedom, so it suited me to a T, but I knew what I couldn’t really... What I had to do, what I couldn’t question and what I could question, and being a Year 12 when I’d already had my friendship groups established for a few years now, I was much more...
comfortable, and I think in Miss R’s eyes and a lot of the housemothers, that suited them as well, they didn’t have to worry about me. And Miss R actually said to me when I went back to give her the idea that I’d love to come back and mentor these girls [laugh] and she said that she thought it was great, because I think a lot of the girls in her opinion, who I was back in Year 8...

R

And she still doesn’t understand....?

A20

No, she still doesn’t understand, but that’s kind of again why I want to have my foot in the door to be able to be that spokesperson, to be like hey Miss R, like these girls aren’t behaving in this way to be ... like they’re not acting devious because of this, because of what you think – actually like think about it in a broader context. Like this is what’s going on, and they’re not isolating themselves from the other non indigenous girls, it’s just you know – hey, if you were in a room full of boys, and there was only a few girls, who would you feel more comfortable sitting with? You know it makes perfect sense. You want to be with the people who you’re most alike, who most understand you, who aren’t going to judge you, and being in a prestigious school where everyone’s got money – who are you going to get along with the most? I’m not saying you don’t, because the other indigenous girl that got the bursary the same year I did, we were friends but I didn’t hang out with her every day, and my whole friendship circle of girls were all non indigenous. So it’s not that you don’t go out and make other friendships, it’s just in those first years, and especially being a boarder where these are the people you have to live with, and these girls are indigenous, their families are indigenous, they live amongst Aboriginality, like Aboriginals – that’s just how it is. Of course they’re going to be like that when they get to a boarding house.

R

How did going to boarding school change you?

A20

I think it provided me with a lot of independence. It really enabled me to reflect on who I wanted to be, and kind of critiqued, and not
in a negative or mean way, who my parents were and what aspects I liked about them and their relationships with the people around them, and how they parented me. My dad was really abusive to my mum, and it really gave me that breath of fresh air to be out of both of their relationships, like not with each other because they don’t talk, and not that it happened even when I was in high school a lot, but they would often talk about each other negatively to me about it you know, and that really upset me, and a lot of anger or emotion that they held for each other would come out in snide comments that weren’t necessary and that would often affect me than I think they know. So it was like a breath of fresh air to actually come out of that and be like – alright, this is where I want to go with my life, and as well not just them, but things about [boarding school], like great things about [boarding school] that like push for women’s rights, and to educate women and to be the very best that you can, and establish...

R And so do you feel like you’ve internalised those values?

A20 Yeah definitely. Like I think to be an Aboriginal woman isn’t less, but to me personally, I’m not going to lie, women are discriminated against more than men, but to be an Aboriginal woman who you’re already discriminated against because of your Aboriginality and then to be a woman, it was like a double whammy, and I feel like it empowers me to think I’m really special, I’m not rare, but I’m like a diamond, and to pass that onto other Indigenous women, and not only Indigenous women but to women, but to specifically Indigenous women. So yeah, it was amazing to just think what do I like about you, or what don’t I like? What can I change? How can I change myself? And even though I don’t realise at the time, I think now that I’m at university, I’m studying nursing, and they tell that a lot, and I think only now have I reflected back and thought wow, that’s what I was doing that whole time. I was able to step out of that environment whether the toxic/non toxic and think okay, what’s going on here? But yeah...
R What do you see yourself doing with your nursing in the longer term?

A20 So I finish this year, I’d like to work for a little bit. I’ve been really tossing up about grad programmes because my biggest drive is to be a voice of indigenous health. I think that takes a lot of time though – that’s like my big, long-term goal. The reason that I wanted to do nursing was to aid that bridge in Indigenous health to non Indigenous, but going into this field, it’s like I just realised, and it really let me down in a way, I thought okay, I’m never going to be able to make the change that I’d ultimately like overnight. So I thought, well what hospital would I like to go to for my grad programme? And I’ve kind of thought, you know what, I’ve been tossing up here and there and I thought [Capital City Hospital], but where am I going to get the most exposure to public health? Like where am I going to get the biggest admission of Indigenous people and non Indigenous, but where am I going to get like public health people that can’t pay for healthcare and things like that? And then I’d like to go back and do my clinical nurse, I’m doing my RN, and that way I can kind of manage a team more, and I think in that way it’s easier for me to be like, alright, this is my team, I’m going to be a team leader, let’s start doing some cultural awareness things, and not always for Aboriginality like for indigenous purposes. Like I really enjoy helping people, and then I’d like to in a few years time go back and do my mid, become a midwife, and I’ve only just got this idea recently – one of the girls I know who’s Indigenous just had a baby, and she thought wow well you could become a midwife and you could go and do some work with the young Indigenous girls that get pregnant, because she’s like, I know me – I didn’t like my midwife, and she was like I know a lot of other girls that I was talking to, because it was just like shame, she said I felt really ashamed because, like I was trying to explain to you before – you have this automatic kind of relationship with an Indigenous person... Anyway, so I thought I’d love to go do that unpaid work and just go and help all these young Indigenous [local people group] women, or if I go out into the community or up north, you know really facilitate that...
because it’s not uncommon, it’s really hard for young Indigenous women to get pregnant unexpectedly and have problems or want to be able to communicate and ask questions. But I’d also like to do some travelling, specifically, go to Canada. I went there with my boyfriend two years ago, and I went up there and I was amazed at how many Native American Indian people approached me and were like – are you Australian? Are you an Indigenous Australian? And it was like ... like I was talking to an Aboriginal person and we automatically just made that connection, because they were Indigenous to that land, and it was just such a beautiful experience. I’d love to go back there and really understand more about their history and their health, but still from that Indigenous point of view. And then yeah, see where that takes me. I can’t really say any more because I’d love... you know I don’t know what knowledge I’ll learn, how I can implement cultural care because I’m not in that setting as much

R Yeah

A20 but ultimately, yeah, really implement the difference between how to provide cultural care

R Who provided the scholarship for you to go to [boarding school]? Did you say?

A20 No, so it was a school bursary. So [boarding school]...

R Oh it was a school bursary?

A20 Yeah, so [boarding school] paid for it

R So no strings attached? It was really like ... and did they provide you extra support either academically or in any way?

A20 Yeah
And did you need it?

Yeah, so a few times I received tutoring for maths, English and human biology, and [boarding school] did pay for that. I think it was only school uniforms, books and any excursions.

That your mum paid for?

that my mum had to pay for, but I was the last year that they did it... so after me...

Why did they not do it after that?

I’m not too sure... probably funding, putting money into bigger things.

How many Indigenous girls are there now?

Four... no six.

Six?

Yeah

So it’s still very small

Tiny, tiny

And how many girls in the school?

I couldn’t tell you, but like ... I’m not good at maths...

1,500 or something?

Yeah, something ridiculous... it would be like one-fiftieth of the population or even like something really...
Was that a burden for you?

Yeah definitely. Even though, because of the upbringing I had, like I said, I’ve been really fortunate to socialise with a lot of different cultures and groups of people, I don’t think I realised when I wasn’t with other Aboriginal girls that I was missing out. It wasn’t ‘til I was in the comfort of another Aboriginal person’s company that I thought, oh my God like...

This is what I’m missing

Yeah, this is what I’m missing.

Did you ever feel that, because you were there as the Indigenous scholar or one of the Indigenous scholars, that there were expectations you had to live up to?

Yeah, definitely like when I was telling you that mum and Miss R decided that it would be best for me to leave, you know I’m sure mum could have turned around if I wasn’t on a scholarship, and been like – no, look my daughter’s just as much got a right to want to board here, and she is going to board here – but they were... and I had to go on a contract like a behavioural contract, it was just such a load of bull, considering the age that I was, considering everything, and you know I’m twenty, I understand this, I understand that if someone’s acting up – why are they acting up? Like it’s a really simple question to ask, but they didn’t see it like that and they used that authority that they were the ones providing me with the scholarship

Was there anybody at school who you would have felt comfortable to tell them why you were acting up if they’d asked?

Yeah, there was one teacher who was called Mr B... I think he went out of his way quite a lot to talk to the Indigenous girls and create a
relationship with all of us as a group, but he left when I was in Year 9, so he was only there for two years, but other than that..

R No-one

A20 No-one

R Did you have one kind of go to person who was there to support you?

A20 I'm just trying to think of some of my favourite teachers or something

R There was no kind of Indigenous support programme?

A20 No, and so that's why I was mentioning before that we had... in a few..

R Just the external people that came in but there was nobody internal, there was no one staff member that was given an office and told that's your go to person?

A20 No way, no way, and I think if anyone... if they were to ask [boarding school] you know, you know in a sense it's a requirement, I don't know if it is but it should be, a requirement that these girls need like an Indigenous support person – I think Miss R who's the head of boarding would like apply that label to herself that she is, but she's not. She really just co-ordinates, facilitates lifts, co-ordinates... like speaks to the Indigenous programmes that are run to bring the girls to unis for reasons of whatever, but no there wasn't

R Did you ever find racism in the classroom or from other girls?

A20 I think very covertly, like institutionalised racism, nothing that I could...

R How would that manifest?
A20 Like, kind of like how I said about... almost like having a really, an intolerance of me and my behaviour because I'm Aboriginal

R Yes

A20 So not you know directly name-calling or anything, it was just that intolerance of – okay she’s got three strikes because she’s not Aboriginal, you’ve got one strike, and it wouldn’t take much for someone to react to my behaviour and automatically revert back to – no, don’t behave like that because you know what happened when you behaved like that, to when I got kicked out of boarding school. But yeah, like nothing I could ever really pinpoint

R Do you think the teachers’ expectations of you were the same as they were for other students?

A20 I think both yes and no. It’s almost like, I don’t know if it comes across as hypocritical, but it was like no, we don’t have an expectation for you to meet this standard because we know you probably haven’t had the same learning opportunities, you don’t have the same home life, like financial support, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, so we don’t expect you to meet at that level, but then also hypocritical to that is – you’re here for a reason. You’re here at [boarding school] to conform to what we’re here to provide you with. So you know on the flipside they were expecting us to reach the same standards as the other girls around us both behavioural and academic-wise. But yeah, I just want to really point out that there was racism in the school, and I don’t know if I can... like I can’t remember specifically, I just know that .... yeah I just want you to know that. Institutionalised racism, and I think a lot of it was from ignorance. I don’t think the majority of those teachers would have intended to be racist, it’s just... I don’t think they would have taught an Indigenous person in their life, and even then if they had, I don’t think they understand how to cater for an Indigenous person in that formal setting you know, and it’s like it’s frightening almost
that you wouldn’t think, out of common sense, well okay why wouldn’t we get some cultural Indigenous training? Or why wouldn’t we provide these facilities for the girls? It’s kind of like going back to like... how am I trying to say this... it’s like ... you know the problems with society today – people criticise Indigenous people because of how they act and how we are from the Stolen Generation. You know why do people drink, or why do families act like this? Why are they dysfunctional? Well you think about it, and a lot of it is from that period where we were cultural genocide, actual genocide, taken from our families and that’s like the same deal here – you’re taking girls out of their families away from their culture, you’re expecting us to conform to this white way, you’re living in the past and you’re trying to live in the future. It’s like they have these conflicting views

R
Do you think it was an attempt to assimilate you?

A20
In a way, yes. In a way, like I think I’ve been trying to say – to conform to how they are to ... yeah

R
And how have you actually responded to that?

A20
I think that’s why like I want to go back. It was so hard as a student to kind of be like oh my God, this is so frustrating, or the only way that I could kind of express myself was what they consider to rebel, to speak when not spoken to, to act out, to be cheeky or disrespectful, but that’s really the only way that I could...

R
Did it ever stop you applying yourself to your studies?

A20
A lot of the time. I’m such a stubborn person. You know if I was ever ... if I was ever in a mood or you know thought that someone had been racist to me or knew they had been, or anything like that, or if I felt upset, out of place, victimised, it would push me back, my confidence would get pushed back definitely.
But would that make you try harder or would it make you...

No way. I’m personally not that type of person that is there to prove someone wrong I think. I’m not going to try harder to show you that I can’t do – it’s if you make me feel upset and like I can’t do something, or if you’ve upset me and made me feel bad about the person that I am or something that I can’t help, I’m just going to believe you and kind of self pity myself. That’s just the person I am

Most of us are the same

Yeah. But that’s why I’m trying to go back and be like, alright as an adult...

Where do you know get this great strength? You’ve got this absolute dynamism about you

I think, like when I left school, it was such a big change for me because I was like alright, how do I live because I was so used to the structure of the school life. I’m like, what do I do with myself? So I thought ... I really struggled in 2012... I graduated in 2011, I struggled ... I felt like I kind of fell into a heap of depression. I thought alright, uni’s where I’m going to go and I went to [University 2] to do nursing, it wasn’t for me, it wasn’t... it’s like I wasn’t as babied almost as I was at [boarding school], like I wasn’t ... yeah I can’t really... like babied, and then so when I went to the university and I thought everyone’s like you have this adult learning, and I felt like I was thrown out into the deep and it just wasn’t for me. So I didn’t do anything with myself but work the odd job, and then I enrolled at [University] in 2013, so I’d been out of school.. that was my second year out of school, and it’s so much more smaller, it reminded me of [boarding school], it reminded me of that structure, and you know helped... I can find help because I don’t have to look too far because it’s not like you’re talking to a population of however many kids – this is us here, here, here
R And you were comfortable to go and ask for help?

A20 Yeah definitely, and even still there’s not many indigenous people. The flipside again is that at [University 2] they have the cultural centre, they have you know and you’re like really supported there, and then I’ve gone back to... even though that was great, I just didn’t the course and things like that at [University 2], and then I’ve gone to [University], which is again almost like [boarding school] – tiny Indigenous population, nil support, but I love it because it’s small and I am supported, not in my Aboriginality, but in my course alone. But it’s like I feel like it’s empowering and I’m not going into something that I don’t know, like L’s getting me to tutor J, and we talk often about how we’re not supported there but for me it’s common ground

R Can you do that do you think because you’re living in this incredibly supportive, culturally responsive environment at college?

A20 I don't live at college

R Oh don’t you live here?

A20 No, I live at home. I live with my mum yeah. I live with my mum. So I don’t know. I find I like to lead, I like to be a leader, not dictate but help, and it excites me that almost like... I did suffer at [BOARDING SCHOOL], but like I said, I was able to learn really valuable lessons about institutions and the way life is and how racism can be both you know institutionalised and just between two people, and then come to [University] and think – alright, this hasn’t thrown me off, I’m used to this. This is how high school was for me

R Are you still finding racism?

A20 No, not at [university 2], but yeah in everyday life of course. But I love it that I can help other people, like go back to school, and I think finding my feet in nursing and being like this is what I want to do,
has extended to other avenues of my life to be like – you know what, if I can help people here, how can I go back and help these people, and you know with J coming in, he’s not going to be used to not being supported because you know he’s like so supported at college, and it’s completely different at [University], but like how can I help that? And really like implement that change and I think that’s like why I think I’m so ambitious and I create these amazing goals for myself because I’m not a woman and I’m not an Indigenous woman and I’m not outspoken for nothing. Literally I have a purpose. I know that there is a change that I’m meant to implement, and like I’ve got to do it, I’ve got to do it. I’m so fortunate for the upbringing that I had, but if there’s things that I could go back and change for others... then that’s my goal in life

R Do you mind telling me, that year when you were really depressed, how did that manifest? Was it just that you weren’t prepared to get involved in things or...

A20 Yeah, I think just as like... it was just a massive change and I wasn’t used to it

R You didn’t kind of go down the line of drinking or taking drugs or anything like that?

A20 No, no, no, not like that. I was more just like staying in bed

R Just withdrawn?

A20 Just withdrawn, yeah. I isolated myself. I had my boyfriend who’s downstairs, and I would socialise with my friends, but because one of the things that I found, I didn’t live here, I wasn’t in this, what they call the Golden Triangle, so it was hard for me to .. going from seeing all my friends every day and feeling loved and supported and needed and wanted, to being like oh okay, I’m missing out on hanging with you guys because I’m not around the corner. You guys don’t text me to say – hey come and meet up because I’m over in
whoop whoop, and like I’d moved houses... there was just a lot of change that I was finding hard to adjust to

R Which is, to be honest, not unusual in the first year uni. I think lots of people find that really hard

A20 Definitely, definitely

R That transition, any transitional point in life, they’re the points you’re most vulnerable

A20 No, I completely agree

R You have to go.

A20 I’m sorry if I rambled

R Are you kidding? You were fantastic!

--------------------------end of interview
Appendix I

Sample of participant profile following data reduction process

A8
Gender: Male
Current Age: mid 20s
Home Community: Remote community, NT
Family of origin background: Both parents Aboriginal
Language background: Other than English
Currently lives: in community
Age at time of commencing boarding school: 16
School history: Grew up between parents' two very remote communities, primary years in community, bilingual; attended regional boarding school for 4 years. Spent years 10,11,12 at an elite school down south.
Post school education: Returned to community immediately after school, fathered one child. Completed Cert III in Sport and Recreation; business management no further education to date.
Post-school employment: Worked for mining company; returned to community and worked in the school as a sport & rec officer, tutoring; a TA at remote/regional schools
Family status: Single

Summary of Interview
This young man is remarkable for his very strong sense of self. He has a clear understanding of the role that he has in education indigenous people about his culture. He rose to position of leadership within his school community but did not transition to university although he had been accepted to a sandstone University. His priority was to gain an education so as to be able to make a difference back in his community and he remains true to that aim in his post school life. His major inspiration for remaining at school even when things were difficult was his father passed away in prison before he had taken his scholarship position.

In some ways this participant ticks every box for indigenous disadvantage: his father died in custody; his mother raised him as a single parent; he has lived with dysfunction in community; he fathered a child at a young age who was born very premature and died at birth; he has had a series of broken relationships. Despite this, he describes a strong sense of self that remained largely unchanged through school, although he speaks about school as preparing him for city life. Others report the depression he succumbed to on his return home, and the challenge of no longer living on a pedestal as he had at school.

Did not progress to uni even though school had arranged a place- this was seen as a valid choice, not failure. Subsequently completed a number of certificate courses. Being employed is a priority, but moves between jobs and in and out from regional centre to home community.

Talks about his strong cultural identity in contrast to boys from more urbanised backgrounds.

Key words: resilience, sense of self, comfortable in his own skin, gregarious, strong sense of purpose, choice and agency, ‘man amongst boys’ (teacher’s description of him), succeeding against the odds;
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