

Connections, community and context: The importance of post-boarding school pathways and re-engagement for remote Aboriginal students

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Many remote Aboriginal Australian students live away from home for periods of time to access secondary education through boarding schools. While financial, political and community support is burgeoning for boarding models that provide scholarships, sports programs, or accommodation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, very little academic research or evidence exists that examines the experiences of students post-boarding. This paper forms part of a broader doctoral research study and specifically focuses on how past students, families and communities from remote South Australia view the outcomes of boarding. Using a grounded theory design, thematic analysis of 32 semi-structured interviews with past students, families and community members led to the identification of three main themes: connections (early exits), community (re-engaging in education), and context (employment in remote communities). Findings indicated that outcomes are not linear, nor easily defined. Developing a theory of change was recommended as a future approach to help families, students and remote schools to clearly define goals and measures of success for each student, recognising a range of interpretations and conceptions of “success”, and adapting these goals as necessary.

Keywords: remote, boarding, pathways, community

Background

Education contributes to improved health and wellbeing and greater socioeconomic opportunities (Australian Government, 2014). For over a decade years, the Australian Government has been committed to the Closing the Gap initiative, which aims to deliver health, education and employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians that are closer to those of non-Indigenous Australians. The 2018 *Closing the Gap* report indicates that Indigenous Year 12 attainment rates have increased across all regions, with a large increase for young Indigenous Australians living in very remote areas from 23 per cent in 2006 to 43 per cent in 2016 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). However, it is difficult to determine where exactly those young people attained their Year 12 certificates (for example, in remote community schools, or at boarding schools). Wilson’s (2014) *Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* made several recommendations based on the assertion that remote and very remote schools with very small numbers of secondary students will not effectively deliver a “full range of secondary education” (p. 143), and that

“the development or expansion of boarding or other residential facilities located close to urban high schools” (p. 143) should be considered. However, a building body of research has been pointing to the complexity of this transition to boarding school, and the unintended challenges students face during the boarding experience. Support services such as the Northern Territory Transition Support Unit and the Department of Education Queensland’s Transition Support Service assist students and families in this complex transition to boarding. However, detailed quantitative analysis of rates of retention, completion, or long-term outcomes for current or past Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have accessed boarding has not been reported. To truly understand the impact of boarding, and the potential effects of relevant policies developed in this space, we must first articulate (1) what outcomes boarding strives for, (2) how these are prioritised and actioned by families and boarding institutions, and (3) what this looks like in the everyday experiences of students post-boarding. This research forms part of a doctoral thesis examining each of these factors, and will focus in particular on the post-boarding school experiences of past boarding students from remote Aboriginal communities.

Evidence on boarding school outcomes

Internationally, evidence on contemporary boarding and residential programs is limited. Various studies have detailed the psychological impacts of experiencing boarding (Evans-Campbell et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2014; Schaverien, 2004), and the historical role and effects of boarding or residential programs in the attempted assimilation of indigenous peoples across the world (Smith, 2009). Hodges et al. (2013), in a review of Australian boarding research, found that most studies have thus far focused on experiences during boarding. Aboriginal students transitioning into boarding (Mander, 2012), student and staff experiences (Hodges et al., 2016), and family engagement and perspectives on boarding (Benveniste, Dawson, et al., 2016; Benveniste, Guenther, et al. 2016) have been explored. Martin et al. (2014) conducted a large-scale Australian study comparing motivation, engagement, and psychological wellbeing in boarding students versus non-boarders, finding no notable differences in most outcome factors. Papworth’s (2014) doctoral study comparing longitudinal academic and non-academic outcomes of boarders to day students also found no significant differences on a range of outcomes between boarders and non-boarders. Papworth (2014) proposes that (if anything), individual characteristics and family demographics were influencing differences in outcomes, rather than boarding or non-boarding status. While these studies provide a significant addition to the field, none have measured outcomes of students beyond boarding. Therefore, little is understood about the long-term outcomes or pathways beyond schooling for boarders. Furthermore, the impacts of contemporary boarding schools on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are still largely unknown.

Redman-MacLaren et al. (2017) reported data from a pilot survey investigating resilience and risk factors for the psychosocial wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students. They suggested that re-engaging students (those who are returning from boarding school back into their home community) were at greater risk of psychological distress than other (currently boarding) cohorts. Re-engaging with the education system post-boarding (especially if a student has been excluded for negative reasons) poses many challenges, such as feelings of disconnection from family and peers (Boden et al., 2016), and the impact of shame. However, Indigenous students can be extremely adaptable, and find many sources of resilience despite exposure to a variety of risk factors (McNamara et al., 2014). Considering that a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children do not complete even their first year of study at boarding school (Mander et al., 2015), there is need to investigate this further.

Proposed outcomes of boarding

A difficulty in evaluating or reporting on long-term outcomes of education is that when one comes to define “success” or a “positive pathway”, definitions are based on personal and socio-cultural contexts. By and large, the concept of a pathway or a linear progression from education in school to higher education, training, or employment, is a Western and contemporary concept (Goodrick et al., 2012). In exploring the concept of a positive pathway for remote youth, Goodrick et al. (2012) found that remote community members often defined such pathways by their absence; that is, that a young person had disengaged from schooling, was disconnected from culture, or demonstrated poor self-concept. Those who worked with children and young people in remote communities felt that a pathway was a more fluid concept, involving many different paths which could change at any point (Goodrick et al., 2012). In a qualitative study of the aspirations of mobile Aboriginal youth, Parkes et al. (2014) found their participants contradicted popular stereotypes portraying young Aboriginal Australians to be lazy, disinterested, delinquent or detached; in fact, they found these young people dreamed and aspired towards education and employment in their own unique ways. For example, education and employment were not only sought to meet basic needs, but were inextricably entwined and largely secondary to family priorities or caring for others (Parkes et al., 2014).

Contemporary arguments in support of boarding or residential schooling often propose that, by coupling achievement-minded schools with residential environments (or boarding houses) that provide positive and nurturing interactions outside of school, educators have an opportunity to minimise the gravitational pull of negative environments (Curto & Fryer, 2014). Apparent philosophical assumptions in support of boarding propose that access to the knowledge, skills, ability, and social and cultural capital of urbanised mainstream society will allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve improved “outcomes” (Benveniste, Dawson, et al., 2016). These intended outcomes are rarely articulated regarding specific goals for each individual student, yet potentially differ between families and boarding providers. Previous work has shown staff working with remote Aboriginal youth to believe boarding will provide access to “walk in two worlds”; that is, to have the skills, knowledge and confidence to “walk” in mainstream society, as well as the “world” of remote communities (Benveniste et al., 2015). Families of remote Aboriginal boarders have also articulated the desire for their children to access boarding to gain opportunities for further education or employment, extracurricular activities, and to build relationships with non-Aboriginal peers (Benveniste, Dawson, et al., 2016; Benveniste, Guenther, et al., 2016). However, communication between families and the boarding residence has also been flagged as a key issue for both staff and parents (Benveniste et al., 2014). Intentional partnerships between remote schools and urban boarding providers have been recommended to mediate cultural, personal and social benefits of boarding (O’Byrne, 2015), yet, despite numerous partnerships already having been established, clearly defined expectations and analysis of long-term outcomes for students are not apparent (Guenther et al., 2016).

Education and employment in remote Australia

Discussions of the benefits of boarding often fail to acknowledge the complexities of the local and cultural context of rural, remote and very remote students. Rural-dwelling youth who have lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are affected strongly by local context, especially where social and spatial distance (from urban resources and opportunities) reinforce one another (James, 2001). In transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people may also be expected to take on different family and cultural responsibilities than young Australians from other cultural

backgrounds (Mission Australia, 2016). Recent studies suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highly value education, as well as pride in their Indigeneity, with spiritual beliefs cited as a source of strength (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017). Although pride in their identities and strong connection to family can be sources of resilience, being knowledgeable in one's culture does not necessarily protect youth from experiencing conflicting aspirations and realities of external cultural expectations or standards (Goodrick et al., 2012). In fact, alternate or resistant conceptions of identity are very common amongst minority groups living within a dominant culture (Dudgeon et al., 2002). Therefore, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth living in boarding school settings, it is likely that some degree of conflict exists between the cultural expectations and beliefs of their two living environments.

Societal, structural and institutional constraints (or the real likelihood of opportunities available) also often affect remote students' lives beyond boarding, and in turn can prevent their agency and aspiration (Parkes et al., 2014). Stable, linear pathways from school through to university or employment are becoming less common across Australia, with most disadvantaged students following disjointed or fragmented pathways (Abbott-Chapman, 2011). Furthermore, the age at which young people are transitioning into work is increasing. Fragmented careers and educational pathways are even more evident in rural and remote areas, where meaningful employment opportunities are limited, and where transport to educational facilities or urban areas is not easily accessible (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Goodrick et al., 2012). For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly those living in remote communities, the entry to employment may require sacrificing elements of their culture, in turn negatively affecting their wellbeing. For example, many jobs would be turned down should they require moving to a new house, or disruption to family life, or if they were deemed morally objectionable (Dockery, 2010).

Current study

Aims and positioning

When one examines the lived experiences of youth, the constraints and complexities of their daily lives and the uncertainty of students' post-school career paths in a fast-changing world becomes evident (Abbott-Chapman, 2011). The aim of the current study was, therefore, not to quantify outcomes of remote Aboriginal boarders, but to provide a basis for understanding their experiences post-boarding. "Post-boarding", for this paper, describes the time after leaving a boarding program, ranging from weeks to a decade. Working as a non-Indigenous researcher with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities entails careful consideration of positioning and biases. Whilst non-Indigenous researchers can never operate from Indigenous standpoints, they can respectfully adopt positions congruent with the goals and needs of Indigenous peoples (Guenther, et al., 2017). Careful consideration and reflection of methods and positioning as a researcher, with cultural sensitivity and collaborative and reflexive practice, can aid in this research (Liamputtong, 2010). Thus, the research was largely driven from the ground up, with the research questions and agenda determined by what families, boarding providers, past students and community members deemed important.

Program and community context

Conducting context-dependent research is also one way to address the challenge of privileging Indigenous voices and experiences, while recognising that other realities and truths are valid (Bainbridge

et al., 2013). The Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands consists of a group of very remote communities in South Australia. The term “very remote” is used as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Classification Structure (ABS, 2016). The research employed a case study approach to explore a residential program and the main communities who access it. The program is referred to as a residential program, as the residence at which students stay is at a separate location to the schools they attend. However, it must be differentiated from residential treatment facilities, as it is designed with access to urban education as its primary purpose. It is also a state-funded program, therefore is unlike most independent boarding schools across Australia. It is necessary to keep the relative uniqueness of this program in mind when interpreting or attempting to extrapolate the findings of this study to other boarding contexts. However, these findings can be considered regarding the experiences of students who come to boarding from, and return to, remote Aboriginal communities across Australia.

Data collection and analysis

The data was gathered through an iterative process of ethnography and interviewing. Repeated visits to communities provided time to build and maintain relationships and a more comprehensive understanding of the contexts within which students, educators and families were living and working. Semi-structured or narrative interviews (dependent on participant choice) were conducted alongside an Aboriginal community researcher, who facilitated introductions to participants, provided cultural guidance, and interpreted Pitjantjatjara to English. The data presented in this paper is taken from a subsection of interviews from the broader doctoral research project, comprising 31 participants. Participants were grouped as past boarding students, family members of past boarding students, and remote community members or service providers. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participant demographics.

Table 1: Breakdown of participants by type, gender and code

Participant group	No.	Gender		Participant codes included in group
		M	F	
Past students	11	2	9	8, 30, 33, 34, 35, 37, 39, 43, 53, 54, 55
Family members	11	2	9	3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 31, 38, 40, 41, 51
Remote community members/ service providers	9	5	4	1, 2, 5, 11, 12, 32, 36, 42, 52
Total	31	9	22	

The time since boarding for the past students ranged between 1 to 15 years. Analysis of data was conducted with a grounded theory approach (without pre-formed coding schemes) allowing the analysis to be performed inductively and remain grounded in the data (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Denzin (2010) argues that practicing grounded theory is ideal as a tool of decolonisation, through its use of analytical, open-ended inquiry. Participants’ experiences and identified themes were then compared and cross-checked against the emerging codes. To protect participant anonymity, limited detail on their age, sex or community has been provided. Thus, participant quotes are identified by a numerical code and their participant group only. While there are several strengths to using grounded theory in this research

context, non-Indigenous researchers must continually examine their impact and position within Indigenous research, recognise that data does not stand alone, and that emergent analysis can take various forms which may or may not be dependent on what the researchers consider as credible data (Engward & Davis, 2015). Therefore, the authors adopted reflexivity as a tool to explore their assumptions, biases and value judgements (Russell-Mundine, 2012). This helped identify and interrogate where our roles, privilege, knowledge systems and construction of evidence may have impacted the data and presentation of findings.

Findings

Connections: Early exits

Connections, or lack thereof, played a large part in several students exiting boarding early. Connections to home, limited connections to the boarding program and forced disconnects were the cause of these early exits. Disrupting connections to home (by returning to boarding), and separating from their peer groups, was particularly difficult for males after transitioning through significant cultural practices (described below as “bush camp”):

They just do what they do with the other young boys ... Young fellas go [to boarding], they come back, go bush camp, bang. Because he’s a man now you don’t have to go school. [They think], “Oh, okay, cos I fit with the youngfellas so you gotta go start sitting with their group and do what they do”. (participant 41, family)

The impact of managing competing expectations from schooling and boarding with family and cultural responsibilities was also recognised as a key contributor to early exits. Coming home for cultural practices or for funerals can exacerbate feelings of homesickness and make it more difficult for students to return to boarding:

Those kids that do return [to community], either they’ve been sent back, or they’re coming back for sorry business, once they’re here, they do not want to go back ... they’ve been homesick, now they’re at home, and it’s really hard ... tears are involved ... lots of bargaining, it’s really hard to get those kids back on the bus. (participant 36, community)

While it may be tempting to suggest that students should avoid coming home mid-term, not being able to attend funerals or other cultural events also deprives students of access to important sources of psychological wellbeing and protective factors, such as connection to land, family, culture and spiritual identity (Zubrick et al., 2010). Developing clear guidelines around what events need to be attended is something that schools should negotiate with community leaders, Anangu staff, family members and with the student themselves.

Lack of connections to the boarding environment also contributed to early exits. For example, a past student described how he saw negative changes in peers during their time in boarding, particularly in their behaviour when they went back to their communities: “Kids’ attitudes change, you know? ... I didn’t want to be like them, so I just told myself it’s time to go back home” (participant 37, past student).

Another past student explained how feeling shame by being challenged academically could lead students to return to where they feel more comfortable, confident and supported: “[The] other reason they come back is because they feel shame. The school groups them in ability, and teachers don’t look at the students

and spend time with them, don't realise or take time, so then kids [feel] shame" (participant 53, past student).

These feelings of alienation and shame in the classroom are not unique to boarding students. Shame and shyness have previously been identified as strong deterrents preventing engagement in education for Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory (Schwab, 1998). More recently, Prout Quicke and Biddle (2017) found that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students felt they were unable to navigate the socio-cultural space of the classroom, as they were unaware of certain unwritten rules and expectations. Boarding providers, therefore, need to find strategies of keeping students connected to home without the risk of disengaging or disconnecting from boarding and schooling opportunities. Addressing student concerns regarding peer connections and classroom requirements may also support students to stay longer, should they want to continue their schooling away from home.

Despite the cited cases above, it was not always the students themselves who chose to leave boarding. Some experienced forced disconnection from boarding, describing this as being "kicked out" (participant 8, past student), and stating that they had desired and attempted to re-engage with the program to no avail. Other community members felt that students could be unfairly or prematurely dismissed from boarding: "[Student name] is very bright and capable, but has difficult behaviour ... but don't just give up on them, [boarding program] are too quick to send them home" (participant 52, community).

Previous studies have indicated that early exits from boarding are not unique to this program, suggesting that, at least for remote and very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, retaining students to complete their secondary schooling is not simply "fixed" by boarding (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017; Stewart, 2015). Undoubtedly for these students, for whom access and connection to home are limited by distance, boarding for long periods of time can be extremely difficult. Despite this, the long-term emotional consequences of returning home for negative reasons must be considered. Whose responsibility it is to transition these students beyond the boarding experience is ill defined, yet usually falls back to families and communities, not the boarding programs who have dismissed them. Boarding staff have previously indicated their limited knowledge of the details pertaining to each student's home and family (Benveniste, Guenther, et al., 2016), so perhaps boarding programs are largely unaware of the consequences of early dismissals, or of losing students prior to graduation. Expectations and acceptability of certain behaviours may also be mis-matched between home and boarding environments, therefore ongoing efforts to clarify reasons for dismissal are essential.

For many students who had left boarding prematurely, severe consequences were apparent when they disengaged from school entirely, with comments such as: "My daughter's daughter went to Adelaide ... But when she came back, she ran away from school" (participant 33, family member); and "My son was supposed to go back [to boarding] but not going now ... there were problems. I sent him to school [boarding] to learn but [he] doesn't go to school now" [in community] (participant 38, family member).

Unpacking the reasons behind students such as the abovementioned not re-engaging in any schooling after boarding is an important task, yet unable to be done with this data alone. Whether this is a reflection on options for schooling in remote communities or whether there is "no going back" after boarding is an important distinction to make. Families from these communities have also expressed frustration at the power that schools hold in making the final decisions regarding entry or exits in boarding (Benveniste, Guenther, et al., 2016). Re-engaging students with boarding would allow continued access to its benefits, and potentially limit the chances of disengaging with school entirely. However, many challenges regarding re-engaging or re-connecting students with boarding were identified. For example, a

community educator found that there was “no clear pathway” for students to come back into the program if they had been asked to leave. Despite the program stating “the door never closes” for such students, they were left with no understanding of what was needed to get back in that door:

So we should have an idea of “these are the things you need to be working on and that you need to demonstrate in this school”, so that we can demonstrate really clear goals, for individuals ... and when you can demonstrate these things, they will consider you again. (participant 52, community)

Others echoed this confusion, suggesting that the program does not give second chances readily, or that they are unclear as to when and how students will be able to return:

Sometimes [they] just don't give a chance – kids come back for a month then want to go back to [boarding] but they say “might come later” ... eventually [the boarding program] invite kids back (when they've almost finished school) but by then they just stay home and graduate. (participant 54, past student)

The above comment highlights the importance of alternate options (such as graduating from their remote community school) for students to continue or re-engage with education in the case of having to wait or not being able to return to boarding.

Community: Re-engaging in education

For communities in which educational achievements are highly valued, where long-term employment opportunities are generally based on these achievements, failure to graduate high school can result in problematic outcomes. Students who have left boarding prematurely require active strategies to create environments that allow them to re-adjust to any new boarding school, back into community, or any other alternative educational opportunities (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017). Boarding is not for every child, and many students in a variety of circumstances find the need to engage with alternate schools or educational providers (Sorin & Iloste, 2006).

What is evident from the stories of these past students, families and communities is that it is key for boarding to not be the only option for secondary schooling. The role of community schools, as either a stopover before re-engagement in boarding, or a place to continue schooling at home, surrounded by family and peers, was paramount. For a number of participants, time at boarding was followed by returning home to continue and often complete their schooling, with comments such as: “My sons graduated, but they finished their school from here [at community school]” (participant 40, family); and “Came back and went to school, stopped at 16 then worked” (participant 53, past student).

Several past students also engaged with other pathways including training, often combining skilled training with jobs and/or with schooling. For example, one student had finished Year 12 in their home community, completing the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) whilst simultaneously training for work with the support of a TAFE provider. Re-engaging with schooling back in community also provides students with an opportunity to access other training: “So if a student leaves that program [boarding] before they finish school and goes back to their home community and goes back to school there, then they will get access to the Trade Training Centre” (participant 32, community).

The following participant expressed the importance and role of the community in supporting students post-boarding, especially when their situations were complex or when engaging with training or school was more difficult:

[The community] support the kids. All the families get on [the phone] and support. Old students talk to them, tell them how we used to be there. It's a very strong school and community ... some of them are married and we support them at school still, even pregnant ones. Help them with SACE and money and when they need lifts to go get training or whatever. (participant 54, past student)

Redman-MacLaren et al. (2017) found that students re-engaging in their communities post-boarding felt safe with family, and that they believed family cared about them when times were hard. This participant noted the efforts and dedication of families as being paramount in re-motivating and re-engaging students with learning:

When kids do get sent home, they come back and families talk to kids, talk and talk, what do they want, work out what kids want to do, get them motivated to learn, "what do you want to achieve?" Kids change when they come back, because of the families (participant 54, past student).

However, if there are no alternative options available in remote communities, or if re-engaging with boarding is difficult, unclear, or not supported by the program, the behind the scenes efforts of families outlined above will only go so far. In fact, they may be in vain. Benveniste, Guenther, et al. (2016) described the power dynamics that can be at play between remote schools, boarding providers and families when it comes to accessing opportunities, and suggest that critical awareness of these dynamics, as well as active efforts to neutralise power amongst the three, are required. Keeping active connections between boarding providers and families beyond boarding, for as long as a student is wanting to engage in schooling, should be a priority, in order to not let any potential re-entries fall through the net.

Context: Employment in remote communities

Engagement in work is commonly viewed as the expected outcome of schooling and training (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014). Post-boarding pathways, therefore, inevitably result at some point in discussions of employment opportunities and engaging in employment. Our findings suggest that engaging in employment post-boarding was not a simple feat. For the majority of the students and families spoken to, home was where they returned after boarding and where they sought employment – "they always come back" (participant 7, family). Many past students were currently, or had previously, been engaged in work within their communities. Participants identified various community jobs they had undertaken, such as working in the school, health clinic, on night patrol, in youth work, construction, community office, and as a cleaner. Several past students had engaged in further university-level education through the University of South Australia's Anangu Teacher Education Program, and were now working as Aboriginal education workers, teachers or Anangu co-ordinators in schools.

A number of past students who were employed had graduated and received their SACE through boarding. However, others had graduated from their community schools, or not graduated at all. Funnell (2008) found that Year 12 completion was not deemed as important to rural Queensland employers as personal qualities such as good communication and customer relations, common sense, good personal presentation, reliability and willingness to work.

Although graduation from Year 12 (completion of secondary schooling) may be considered a major goal of boarding schools and a measure of “success”, for many students, graduation did not guarantee employment. Some suggested that their communities had a lack of opportunities, or that there is “nothing back here for them”, and that even graduates would “come back, have babies, walk around” (participant 6, family). Others believed some of these graduates “come back home and are lost” (participant 30, past student). Participants commented on their frustration to see students “in boarding a long time, finishing Year 12 and they’re not doing anything” (participant 33, past student). Increasing access to and/or achievement in the labour market is seen as the foundation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people overcoming socioeconomic disadvantage.

For many Aboriginal Australians, familial bonds, shared obligations and responsibilities reach beyond the nuclear family to extended family systems including blood and non-blood relatives (Parkes et al., 2014). The implications of these responsibilities can affect many Anangu, especially if they are engaging in work:

No jobs. Not enough money ... and if there is a job there, they’re not only feeding their own family but extended family as well, so, you know, they’re always poor, and that cycle is just repeated, round and round, you know? You go back, come back get a good education, go back, get a good job, that job feeds you, your family plus the extended family. And it’s hard to say no. (participant 3, family)

However, for some, family also proved to be strong motivator and protective factor against the temptation to lapse into unemployment or being “on the dole” (commonly termed “sitting down”). Family members were encouraging of their children to get back up and engage in what was available in their community, with comments such as: “I went and saw someone about [local work] for my daughter, so after coming home and sitting down, now she works and has been chosen to manage the program because she speaks Pitjantjatjara and English (participant 38, family); and “They will come back for a couple of months, then we will make them get a job” (participant 6, family).

It was clear that families also recognised that their children may want some time off to re-engage with community life and to work out what they would like to do next.

In the context of remote and very remote Aboriginal communities, community and family politics can also affect employment opportunities and pathways. There is no denying that there are a limited number of positions and a limited range of jobs available, but a frustration for many is watching non-Anangu (Piranpa) working in positions that could go to Anangu:

See like [organisation] had a job there, they could have gave that job to an Anangu person but they gave that job to somebody who’s not from the community ... could have gave that to somebody who left [boarding], Year 12 grad, they could offer them that position. (participant 41, family)

Guenther and McRae-Williams (2014) highlight that non-Indigenous domination of employment in remote communities is not necessarily due to a lack of qualifications or education of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people; in fact, many positions are filled by non-Indigenous people who do not have Year 12 or certificate qualifications. Conflicts of interest such as “looking after your family first” (participant 40, family) were also thought to influence the ability of some graduates seeking work. Employers may not be willing or able to recognise and adapt to these needs, forming biases:

There's the impediments that community living bring upon people, you know, social responsibilities, family responsibilities, community responsibilities, you may need to go here there and wherever, depending on what family say, and that takes you away from work commitments. Often you'll find employers say "they're unreliable employees". (participant 32, community).

While most past students had returned home, a few moved away for periods of time to work or to gain further training:

[After I graduated] I kept working and learning at the same time, stayed in the city, caught the tram every day, was working in a health clinic, booking patients and that. Got it organised through school, try to help you get into stuff ... [it] was different leaving school, going to uni had to pay own rent, cook meals, get up yourself. (participant 39, past student)

Moving to bigger towns nearby such as Alice Springs marginally increased employment opportunities; however, a participant described how moving away for work or study takes a big commitment and a lot of dedication:

I think it's easier because [you're] back with families speaking language you know? It's more comfortable, you're surrounded by local people, and you've got your mates here ... I think it would be a decision you have to make [to leave], you know? Because [in] the city everything is happening, there's like ... lots of commitment, you know, if you want to achieve your goals. It would take a lot of work out of you. Which means less family time. (participant 37, past student)

Summary and future directions

Summary of main findings

The aim of the current study was to provide a basis for understanding students' experiences post-boarding, using a case study of an Aboriginal residential program in South Australia. The first major theme highlighted that, for many of these young Aboriginal students, the boarding experience ended prior to completion of their schooling. Key reasons cited for these early exits were cultural connections and homesickness, feeling disconnected or alienated in the boarding environment, or being asked to leave. The impact of cultural connections is complex, as, for some students, fitting in with their peers and fulfilling new roles in community took priority over returning to boarding. This is a significant example of how the goal or hope of "walking in two worlds" (Benveniste, Guenther, et al., 2016; Benveniste et al., 2015) is not always easily enacted. Feeling disconnected from the boarding environment is another main cause of students leaving or disengaging from schooling. While this may be interpreted as a failure of the student, boarding providers and educational institutions need to recognise their own failures here in not providing an environment that is suitable and comfortable for these students. Pathways to re-engage with boarding were also unclear. For those who had exited early, there was a tendency to disengage from any educational pathway. However, as the second major theme of community suggests, many students did manage to re-engage with education and/or employment with the support of family members, community schools or other training providers. This indicates the breadth of support and a much wider network required for positive pathways and outcomes beyond boarding. The context of remote community life, including perceived lack of job opportunities (particularly where non-Aboriginal people

took new positions over young community members), and family and community politics (that is, looking after your own) also strongly influenced engagement in employment. Social and family responsibilities were also factors that inhibited employment for some, often requiring time away from work or moving between communities.

Previous literature on boarding outcomes has so far failed to highlight the early exits seen here. While Mander (2012) identified post-school pathways and avoidance of premature dropouts from Aboriginal community schools as being an important reason for parents valuing the boarding experience, more needs to be done in exploring the dropout rates from boarding schools and the resultant outcomes. For many of the past boarding students we interviewed, their pathways resembled more of a mosaic, as Abbott-Chapman (2011) described, filled with periods of employment in varying roles, and periods of time where they were having a family or were not employed. While it has been recognised that contemporary Aboriginal Australian mobility occurs for a variety of needs, including familial obligations, cultural ceremonies or customs, seasonal events, and access to services (Biddle & Prout, 2010), employment and training opportunities also influenced the mobility of many past boarding students, with some moving away from home to seek further opportunities. Migration to urban centres would provide more options for these students; however, maintaining important familial and social bonds, and connection to country, is a continued practice for many remote Aboriginal youth (Parkes et al., 2014), and played a large role in bringing and keeping students back to their communities post-boarding. Therefore, our findings indicate that attending boarding school and graduation do not necessarily guarantee “success” in the Western sense of engagement with employment or further education. Rather, personal agency, community contexts, and familial expectations are most important in guiding students’ pathways beyond boarding.

Future directions

While this study has provided a basis for framing the potential outcomes of boarding for remote Aboriginal students, future research should incorporate a broader range of contexts and boarding programs across Australia. A larger sample size would also provide a more comprehensive picture of the impacts of boarding, such as a large-scale quantitative analysis of boarding access, retention, and completions. However, this is complicated by boarding providers inevitably having varying levels of commitment and capacity to measure outcomes of their students; while some programs may conduct internal reviews, this data is rarely publicly accessible (Guenther et al., 2016). Yet, accountability for outcomes and clear records of the impact of boarding should be a priority.

Applying a more focused theoretical approach will also develop our understanding of boarding. Theory of change may be particularly useful, as it allows one to explore how and why an initiative (for example, boarding school) works or doesn’t, delineating its pathway by establishing explicit early, immediate and long-term outcomes, and articulating the strategies that enable the achievement of these outcomes (Connell & Klem, 2000). Identifying early, immediate and long-term outcomes will also expand the notion of success in boarding, and that it is not unilateral. For example, if boarding was working well for a student at a particular time, but then family or community contexts changed, this does not need to count as a “failure”, either on the part of the program or the student. Furthermore, looking at boarding as an overall system with multiple actors within it will broaden the understanding of which action strategy at which level (for example, institutional, personal and familial) may be affecting the pathway to intended outcomes.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our findings suggest that boarding providers should work with families, students and remote schools to clearly define goals and measures of success for each student, recognising a range of interpretations and conceptions of “success”. Measuring and keeping track of student outcomes (academic and non-academic) during and beyond boarding is also essential, particularly for those who exit boarding early and are at risk of disengagement from education or positive pathways. It is evident that many students do not necessarily fit with boarding or require periods of time back home during their boarding experience. Maintaining engagement with education once leaving the boarding program appears essential to continuing to employment or further education, yet requires opportunities to be available within students’ home communities. Establishing communication strategies between boarding providers, community organisations and remote schools will enable smoother post-boarding transitions. Maintaining strong relationships with remote schools would enable boarding providers to support students who wish to re-engage with boarding, or to clarify the requirements for re-engagement. Collectively, boarding providers, schools and policy makers should support and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to identify their needs, contribute to the design and delivery of services, and negotiate the space between education and employment. However, as Parkes et al. (2014) suggest, for those pathways to be viable, we must acknowledge and value each individual’s cultural agency and understanding of success.

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Please cite this article as:

Benveniste, T., Guenther, J., King, L., & Dawson, D. (2022). Connections, community and context: The importance of post-boarding school pathways and re-engagement for remote Aboriginal students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 51(1). DOI 10.55146/ajie.2022.48



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