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PARENT PERSPECTIVES OF BOARDING: INSIGHTS FROM REMOTE ABORIGINAL FAMILIES

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Increasingly, remote Aboriginal families are being encouraged to transition their children into boarding environments to complete secondary schooling. However, only a handful of studies have sought to understand families' experiences of and decisions about boarding, and to date, the perspectives of remote Aboriginal families have scarcely been heard. This paper presents findings from qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with parents, caregivers and family members of remote South Australian students boarding at a residential boarding program. The decision to board was not always instigated by family, but was often suggested or largely facilitated by remote community teachers. Additionally, families were found to navigate between different boarding providers depending on the child, their experience, and their capacity to engage with alternative programs. Finally, families expectations of boarding were not always met, which suggests a number of improvements can be made to value their perspectives, respect and support their expectations, and provide alternatives to boarding. This paper provides insight into the perspectives of remote Aboriginal families engaging with boarding schools, points to the implications of their experiences, and presents recommendations to consider in policies regarding boarding and remote education.

Introduction

Over recent years, many have lamented the state of remote schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The blame for failure has been directed at teachers and their teaching

quality (Anderson, 2012; Hughes & Hughes, 2012), parents, the 'dysfunction' of communities (Wilson, 2014) and resourcing or equity issues (Gonski et al., 2012). Regardless of the reasons, educational commentators are suggesting that boarding offers a convenient solution, in that it takes children away from the purported dysfunction of remote communities (ABC, 2013). Boarding is also thought to immerse children in an English only environment where higher expectations and achievements are the norm (Pearson, 2014), and addresses the pragmatic problem of quality educational delivery in remote communities (Wilson, 2014).

Against these backdrops, this paper examines the perceptions of a group of parents from remote communities, who send their children to a boarding facility in Adelaide. It forms part of the lead author's doctoral study and provides a critique—based on parent perceptions—of issues related to choice, expectations, communication and family support.

Background

Boarding and Remote Education

The history of formal education of Indigenous peoples in Australia and globally has a chequered and often painful past, including policies of assimilation and forced removal of children from their families, self-determination eras, and more recently 'closing the gap' initiatives (Cassidy, 2009; Hoerig, 2002; Smith, 2009). While there are no longer explicit policies forcing the removal of children from their families or communities, remote education in Australia remains a highly politicised and complex space. Quantitative measures such as attendance, completion and NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) results continue to demonstrate remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as obtaining significantly lower outcomes than non-Aboriginal or urban-based students. However, the stories and implications behind these numbers are rarely critiqued, and are often used to frame assumptions of lower 'quality' of remote schools, and increased 'dysfunction' in remote and very remote communities (Osborne, 2015).   In response to these assumptions, and to other real challenges produced by remoteness, support to send remote students away to board in urban centres for their secondary education has increased (Pearson, 2004; Wilson, 2014). This positive support for boarding programs, and their self-reported outstanding outcomes for their graduates, have largely dominated media and policy discussions and have even led to key education strategies (particularly in the Northern Territory). However, some prominent educators, (e.g. Chris Sarra), have cautioned complete reliance on boarding, as it will not be accessible or appropriate for many students. Such perspectives highlight that there must be places for remote students to return to – and that the aim must be to provide educational opportunities for *all* remote students. While the provision of options and access to secondary education for remote students is a discussion that extends somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, the outcomes of these discussions and policies inevitably directly impact the experiences and choices available for remote families and communities. Therefore bridging the perspectives of these families to the perspectives that form policy directions is essential.

Parents' choice or practical reality?

Supporters of boarding suggest there are a number of benefits that rural and remote students can gain through access to urban educational environments. Such benefits have been described as seeing and learning to interact in the world outside their community (i.e. gaining social capital), skill development through activities previously unavailable to them, and immersion in the dominant language, English (Bass, 2014; Benveniste, Dawson, & Rainbird, 2015). So far, these proposed benefits have generally been discussed at a broader level of intentions of schools and policy makers, and little has been presented on parental and familial reasons for sending their children to board. Hodges, Sheffield, and Ralph (2013) provided a review of boarding in

Australia, finding that empirical research on reasons for boarding is scant. They did, however, find that according to the Independent Schools Council of Australia (2008), 55% of Australian families accessing boarding schools indicated that there was little to no choice other than boarding for their children. Other studies conducted in Australia have shown that parents from rural communities often feel an obligation to send their children to boarding school, despite their preference to keep them at home (Bramston & Patrick, 2007; Hadwen, 2014). For example, in Hadwen's doctoral research on transition experiences for boarders and their families, parents often cited boarding being the 'only way' their children could access a high-quality education, and that it was one of the few options available to them (Hadwen, 2014). Furthermore, Bramston and Patrick (2007) found that parents in rural Australia felt that in order to ensure future success, they wanted their children to engage daily with a variety of senior courses unavailable in rural and remote schools (other than via distance education). In investigating the transition experiences of male Aboriginal boarding students in Western Australia, Mander (2012) further highlighted frustrations felt by parents at the lack, or poor quality, of local secondary options. However Mander also found that many parents saw boarding school as a 'great opportunity' for their children, offering them a way to grow beyond the margins of local secondary school pathways and limited opportunities. Therefore, this begins to build some understanding of parents' reasons for sending their children to boarding, yet there is still limited discussion or knowledge about how a parent chooses a boarding school, what influences this choice, and what facilitates or inhibits access boarding programs.

Critically Evaluating Parent Expectations

Evidence shows that parental expectations of long term educational attainment is related to achievement across primary, middle and secondary schooling, regardless of family socio economic status, race or ethnicity, prior achievement, or early home-based involvement (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Jeynes, 2012). Parents' goals and expectations for their children reflect largely upon cultural norms and values developed over time, forming belief systems that preserve cultural practices and regulations that can be passed on to new generations. Of course, they are not always a direct replication of culturally prescribed norms, but also reflect individual and personal belief systems (Cheah & Chirkov, 2008). Furthermore, culture is not static, and adapts and changes over time and circumstance. In a Guatemalan study, Ishihara-Brito (2013) explored rural indigenous parents' perceptions of their children's schooling and educational quality at a primary school level. They found that parents saw the opportunity for their children to attend school as an achievement in itself, largely due to their own limited experiences with formal education. Similarly, in Western Australia, Lette, D'Espaignet, Slack-Smith, Hunt and Nannu (2009) found that the likelihood of Aboriginal families pursuing education for their children depended on their own experiences. In particular, mothers who regretted not pursuing education when they were younger now saw the opportunities it would present for their children (Lette et al., 2009). When parents or families allow themselves and their children to aspire to possibilities beyond what has been, and is currently available or present in their circumstances, this can be defined as having aspirational capital. This is defined by Yosso (2005) as 'the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, despite real and perceived barriers', and has been seen in families of different circumstances, wealth, and cultures worldwide.

The underlying philosophical assumptions behind the support for boarding is the perceived notion that access to the knowledge, skills, ability and cultural capital of urbanised mainstream society will allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve improved 'outcomes'. Educators have largely drawn on the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu to explain and apply solutions to why academic outcomes are lower for certain populations, assuming that access to education and knowledge will rectify and improve such outcomes. However, as others have argued, especially through Critical Race Theory, such assumptions rely on the notion that

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mainstream cultural capital is what is of value, and often disregard the inherent skills, capabilities and knowledge that students and their families already possess (Yosso, 2005).

Context and aims of current research

In work presented and conducted through the Remote Education Systems project (Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, 2015), concepts of a 'successful' education from remote Aboriginal families' perspectives were found to reflect the importance of language, identity and belonging, culture and country, getting a job, and strong intercultural and social capacity (i.e. 'being strong in two worlds') (Guenther, Disbray & Osborne, 2015). In the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands, in remote South Australia, this concept of being 'strong in two worlds' and the perceived benefits of accessing schooling and experience in the city have been recognised for many years. Over 20 years ago, Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara peoples) families and members of the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC) created a partnership with the South Australian Department of Education (now the Department for Education and Child Development), which provides secondary students accommodation in the city to access schooling. Over time, the program has developed and grown to become a residential program with capacity for around 100 students. This program has been the basis of the lead author's doctoral research project exploring the expectations, experiences and outcomes of boarding for these students, their families and their communities. Boarding programs aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students take several forms across Australia, including hostels, family group homes, boarding schools and residential colleges. The particular case study used for this research is referred to as a residential program, as the residence or boarding house at which students stay is at a separate location to the schools that they attend. As the program is State Government funded (unlike the majority of boarding schools across Australia), students can access boarding with no financial cost to their family, and without rigorous interview or application processes (which are usually required to access private boarding programs). Previous findings from this project have presented the goals and expectations of staff working in the residential program and explored the communication and connection between the staff and families, with each establishing that both staff and families emphasised the need to further understand and hear each other's perspectives (Benveniste et al., 2015; Benveniste, Guenther, Rainbird, & Dawson, 2016). Therefore, we sought here to further consider the perspectives of remote Aboriginal families accessing boarding. Considering the broader political and educational context, exploring how parents' perspectives influence their engagement with, and understanding of boarding, and highlighting their expectations (met or unmet), will allow for a more critical analysis of the impact of boarding on remote communities.

Methodology

The principal researcher is a non-Aboriginal woman from Adelaide, South Australia, and identifies and challenges the impact of her implicit values, assumptions and institutional biases that influence the interpretation and presentation of this data. Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be a contested space for a non-Aboriginal researcher (Guenther, Osborne, Arnett & Disbray, 2015) however, productive dialogue with collaborative partnerships between researchers and communities can be achieved (Chilisa, 2012). The broader aims of this research were therefore developed and adapted as a result of discussions with Anangu, boarding providers, and the broader remote education community. Furthermore, a Senior Aboriginal Community Researcher with established relationships in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands communities guided data collection, acted as a community liaison and interpreted a number of interviews that were conducted in Pitjantjatjara.

Procedure

Data were gathered using qualitative research methods, including informal observation, semi-structured and narrative interviews. Initial observation and engagement with the residential program took place through volunteer hours of the principal researcher over a period of two years. The style of interview used, (semi-structured or narrative), was determined by the participants. Interviews were conducted in four communities in the APY lands and in Adelaide, through purposive and snowball sampling. This subset of data from the broader project consists of 14 interviews with 11 parents and 3 carers (extended family members) of students in the program. To protect anonymity they are presented as a coded parent interview number. Prior to commencement of the research, approval was gained from Central Queensland University Human Research Ethics Committee, the Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee, and Central Australian Human Research Ethics Committee, as well as relevant educational committees.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded for participants who felt comfortable giving permission, however several informants did not wish to be audio-recorded and instead gave permission for detailed notes to be taken by the researcher. All interviews were then transcribed before applying thematic analysis with the assistance of NVIVO®, a qualitative data analysis software tool. A process of constant comparison across participants was used to organise the individual data, moving from general (e.g. open) codes to more focused (e.g. selective) codes relating to the broad research questions (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

Decisions to board

As the literature suggests, the majority of family members interviewed wanted their children to board with the intention for them to 'get their education' or 'to further their education'. This was also framed as wanting them to 'learn more' or 'learn new things'. Families also reflected that boarding would allow their children to 'focus more, away from the distractions in community';

> 'At home there are more family around, more distractions in class with [other] kids interrupting, asking questions. They need to learn to do things for themselves - focus on kutju…[yourself], your teacher [and learning]' (Participant 5, parent)

It was also expected that once their children were educated through boarding, this would lead to employment or future educational opportunities;

> 'So that at the end she will be educated and get a job' (Participant 8, parent);

> 'We want our kids to go to university, to have every opportunity that they can. Go as far as they can' (Participant 3, parent)

For one parent, the benefits of their children going to boarding extended to being able to 'get jobs and help pay for food', thus contributing to the family as well. These statements are consistent with previous studies, such as Ishihara-Brito (2013), which have seen parents with limited resources in rural areas considering schooling to be a means of obtaining jobs and financial capabilities beyond their own resources. The view of education as opening opportunities you would never have had, or making sacrifices to get 'better' jobs, has also been seen previously with Aboriginal families (Lette et al., 2009). Others participants were more

specific about wanting their children to learn about 'both worlds', and that they would learn to 'get up early and go to school' (Participant 2, parent), or learn to 'go between, and have knowledge of both worlds' (Participant 7, parent). Another parent also explained that it was more than just education at school, but 'learning' and gaining access to other experiences;

> 'They learn everything at [boarding]. Sometimes I learn from them! They do sports, bike riding, trips on weekends…' (Participant 4, parent)

All of these families had clear responses to why they wanted their children to board, challenging some of the aforementioned deficit-based rhetoric that assert lower student outcomes on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' lack of value or support for education. In fact, families' responses were quite consistent with the benefits proposed and goals articulated by residence staff, such as skill development in mainstream society, and the capacity to increase their choices and opportunities beyond schooling (Benveniste et al., 2015). These findings also reaffirm that cultural capital is not seen as simply being inherited but that it can be gained with an accumulation of specific knowledge, skills and abilities valued by privileged groups in society (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As part of a series on 'the heart of learning' from Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara people) perspectives, Minutjukur and Osborne (Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014) described how Anangu are strongly aware that these are modern times, and look ahead to the modern world that values education, training, qualifications and jobs (Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014). However, they also emphasise that in the pursuit of the power of education and the doors that it will open, young people must take Anangu knowledge, culture and language with them, and that families must support them to do so (Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014). Unfortunately, with this particular study we didn't uncover any further insight into how effective learning in both cultures is achieved or what the implications of accessing mainstream education so far away from home are.

Who's Choice?

Parents also indicated that boarding was for their children to access 'education, to finish school' (Participant 7) and that there was 'nothing else' or 'no other options' (Participant 6) available in their community for secondary schooling. This particular program appears to be chosen as it is an accepted option amongst other community members, and because families had seen others attend - 'all the kids go there, everyone' (Participant 9) and 'you know, they cater for the APY lands kids' (Participant 11). Vincent, Braun, and Ball (2010) compared school and childcare choices and decision making of lower income English 'working class' families and 'middle class' families, and found that some families actually refused choice or did not make a choice, by expecting the nearest school to be satisfactory. Although this may be the case here, it is likely that in addition, families need to be satisfied with what schooling options are available, as there is no other option to enable an active choice. Not all participants were satisfied with accepting only one option, as highlighted by this parent;

> 'There should be another school, much broader than [program name], they [families] think it's the only one for Anangu people but they need better, you know? For them to succeed in the world' (Participant 3, parent)

Another factor for a number of families in assessing boarding and schooling options was being able to choose options that accommodated for multiple children. Having all of their children together contributed to decision making for one parent;

> 'I just wanted my girls to be together. Yeah cos her sister and her younger, both her other two sisters were going to school there as well, and I wanted them to be

> together. It was much easier for me, and they used to go back together on the bus'
> (Participant 3, parent)

However, other families had children with different abilities, needs, or opportunities, therefore had accessed different programs for different children. Vincent (2010) highlighted that practices and meanings of choice are subject to social, cultural and economic variations in terms of who gets to choose, who has their choice realised, and what, how and why people choose when they are able to. They also argue that there are alternate priorities in play for some respondents, including attachments to the communal and the local (Vincent et al., 2010). Furthermore, having the financial capability to support multiple children to access private boarding schools is unlikely for many families, therefore parents may have to exercise strategic decision making depending on their expectations for each child. Some families had already identified other boarding programs that they would like their children to attend, but found that accessing these programs entailed a degree of difficulty;

> 'I would like to see them go to other schools like [private boarding school], but if parents want their kids to go to [those schools] the application forms are too hard, sometimes parents don't understand… they [the school] only come out [to community] for one day, talk, and leave enrolment forms, but then they go. A lot of parents try to start the forms but then give up because too complicated' (Participant 5, parent)

Another parent spoke of how they had approached the local community principal to get help applying for such a private boarding school, but that there 'wasn't much support to apply' (participant 14, parent). These particular comments point to the disconnection between what parents choose or want for their children, and what may be available or accessible to them or their children. Navigational capital is a form of cultural capital described by Williams (1997) (as cited by (Yosso, 2005)), by which people connect to social networks that facilitate navigation through spaces in the community including educational, health, and legal systems. While some families already appear to possess navigational capital, they faced systematic challenges and resistance from the spaces (schools) they engaged with. For others, teachers or principals of the remote school that their children attended largely influenced and supported the decision for their children to board. For example;

> 'The school decided to send the kids to [boarding program]… they had good behaviour at school, or kids were doing well at school here, then they [the school] speak to the parents' (Participant 6, parent)

Other families did not see the schools influence as a positive, especially as the perception was that 'the process was about the kids attendance' but that 'if the kids are smart they should go';

> 'Even if I had a say with the school and argued and said 'look I want my kid to go' they were the ones who made the last decision.' (Participant 1, parent)

This suggests a contradiction between what some parents feel the requirements for boarding should be, and what schools value and acknowledge as appropriate requirements. If Aboriginal families do need the support and guidance of remote schools to access boarding, this leaves a large responsibility on these schools to have fair and reasonable processes in providing this support. There are many factors that would influence this support, for example schools may not feel the boarding environment would be suitable socially or academically for the student. However it is important that schools communicate this to families clearly. A way to mitigate the effects of the positional power of schools in making the 'final decision' about boarding for students, would be to support families to make informed decisions and build the capacity to apply for other options, should they choose them. Some parents suggested this themselves,

particularly highlighting the value to be gained by supporting and developing families and their capacity to support their children in earlier years;

> 'Some parents waste time in younger years by parents not focusing while they are young, not pushing kids early' (Participant 9, parent)

Another participant felt that support was needed for families to be stronger and be able to support their children in focusing on their studies and staying in school back home;

> 'They need help. Kids here are bosses already of parents. Strong people have grown up in the middle of strong people ' (Participant 12, parent)

Planning ahead and choice making takes skill, knowledge and careful consideration. It also requires a degree of stability, in knowing what is coming and being able to plan ahead according to known or assumed circumstances. Therefore, despite parents wanting and expecting education to be beneficial for their children, it is not always possible. Burton and Osborne (2014) discuss how they see the role of family in supporting young Anangu to 'imagine a future' when seeing that future and pursuing it becomes increasingly difficult in current times. This is something that all families continue to face, as the guidance that children require naturally changes alongside cultural, familial, and societal influences change over time. Therefore while families may be willing to engage with their children's futures and aspire for them to achieve their secondary education, parents themselves may be lacking the (mainstream) social, cultural or economic capital, or confidence required to increase the chance of their expectations being met (Vincent et al., 2010).

Expectation versus Reality

Generally, families expected that boarding would provide their children with educational opportunities and experience in mainstream and urban society. However, for some parents, the experience was not what they anticipated. For example, one parent found that their children did not receive the opportunity to socialise with non-Aboriginal students as much as they had expected;

> 'I wanted them to just board and be part of the high school mainstream. I didn't realise they had their own Anangu classes…it was just like going into a community school' (Participant 10, parent)

Another parent echoed this, as they felt that their children could have been pushed harder and mixed with 'mainstream' schooling more;

> '[They should have] mixed them with mainstream but they didn't…. they send them off to [boarding program] and they don't explain if they're bridging or [mainstream] year 8…' (Participant 9, parent)

Therefore parental expectations around the social and educational programs offered by boarding were not met in these cases. The bridging program as mentioned here is part of the schooling side of the boarding program, and entails specific classes tailored to Anangu students which are conducted separately to the rest of the high school which they attend. The effectiveness of the bridging program was also questioned by another family who suggested that some students did not come away with the necessary skills to graduate or move to other programs or schools. It is possible that parents have been disappointed like this due to unclear communication about what the schooling side of the program will provide, or what level of academic ability is required for students to transition effectively into mainstream classes:

'We don't know anything about that [the school] side' (Participant 6, parent)

Our findings reveal that for some families, the residential program does not meet the expectations of what parents consider to be a good education for their children. Where parents challenged this appropriateness, they felt they were discouraged and labelled as 'problematic':

> 'Because we're not an 'uwa' (yes) family, we disagree with some of their [the boarding school]… and even my children disagree with some of their rules and that, and I suppose they don't like people that have knowledge and understanding' (Participant 6, parent)

Consequently, the equality of parental input into how the program is run should be considered in the interactions between boarding providers, educators, and families. Families expectations may not always meet reality, therefore residence and school staff may need to take further care in communicating openly, acknowledging parents expectations, and (within their capacity), genuinely support the achievement of their desired outcomes. This may be difficult under pressure for time and resources faced in remote schools, therefore considering how boarding schools, families and remote schools can work together in establishing, managing and meeting expectations would be largely beneficial, and deserves further attention.

Summary and Recommendations

Although the literature indicates some reasons that parents choose for their children to board (Bramston & Patrick, 2007; Hadwen, 2014; Hodges et al., 2013; Mander, 2012), there has, to date, been limited data presented from the perspectives of remote Aboriginal families. Therefore, this paper aimed to contribute their perspectives of boarding and to explore the implications of their experiences in regards to the current push for more students to access boarding as opposed to local remote secondary schooling. Consistent with previous studies (Ishihara-Brito, 2013; Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014), most families cited choosing boarding for their children to gain access to education and eventual employment opportunities. Broader learning, and developing the capacity to move between the 'world' of their remote communities and the 'world' of cities, were also seen as beneficial to their children in employment opportunities and further education. We also found support for the limited Australian boarding literature in that for a number of families, boarding was seen as either the 'only' option, or the best option available for Anangu students. Interestingly, in some cases, remote school teachers or principals suggested and recommended boarding for their students, or became the key broker in access to the program. This finding is key when considering previous findings from our research, which also suggested that some families feel unable to communicate with this boarding program as problems arose, but that they found liaising with their local remote schools helped facilitate these discussions (Benveniste et al., 2016). Unfortunately, several families also indicated that their expectations of boarding were not met. This appears to be particularly important for families with children who are higher achievers, for whom the family have high expectations. Taken together, one could interpret these findings to indicate that despite the aspirational capital of the families who shared these stories, navigational capital is limited, or determined by external influences.

Despite decades of deficit-based rhetoric surrounding remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (Osborne, 2015), this study further emphasises that Anangu families are clearly aware of the importance of and value of gaining an education. In fact, they were the original instigators of this boarding program, which exists first and foremost as an initiative of Anangu recognising and desiring the opportunity to access the benefits of a city-based mainstream education. However, as some families did not have their expectations met, more detailed discussions around aspirations versus expectations of parents may be of use, moving beyond 'what do you want for your children' to 'what should education look like in a boarding

setting' or 'how can boarding meet that expectation'. This is especially the case for where tensions may arise between Anangu having genuine desires to access and grasp the benefits of mainstream education, without sacrificing any part of their embedded cultural identity (Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014). These findings also call to question the ability of one program to address the needs and academic abilities of a range of students. If student numbers increase as a result of policy shifts and decreased availability of remote secondary schooling, this will become progressively more difficult to address. Even within this small dataset, a 'one size fits all' approach appears unsuitable. Segregating students based on academic ability or access to scholarships is complicated, however, when considering families with multiple children with different needs and abilities. This reflects a finding from Lette and colleagues (2009), that for many Western Australian Aboriginal mothers, the schooling available was deemed to be inappropriate, despite their beliefs in the value of education for their children. Considering the broader context of boarding in Australia, very few programs currently exist that provide state-funded accommodation, therefore should rural or remote families wish to access boarding, they must either fund this independently, or through accessing scholarship funds from corporate, benevolent or not-for- profit organisations (e.g. Yalari, Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), or the Smith Family). While the number of boarding scholarships aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is rising, as we have seen here, applying for and accessing such funds is complex and requires certain resources not always available to remote families. Remote schools and communities are perhaps the as yet undervalued partners in boarding, as they not only play a key role in preparing students to board, but also can provide resources and navigational capital for families. Acknowledging and enhancing relationships between students' home communities and schools and boarding programs should therefore take priority. As yet, we know little of the nature of these relationships; therefore future research should aim to identify key aspects of these connections between boarding and these communities. Furthermore, providing genuine spaces for families and boarding programs to communicate and engage with each other on an ongoing basis to establish and manage expectations is a necessary focus moving forward. Supporting and communicating with families early on in regards to planning ahead and making informed choices about where they would like their children to access secondary schooling could also mitigate the influence of potential prejudices or priorities at play for educators, and enhance the power of families to make their own choices.

As this research was based on only one residential program (as a case study), it is not without limitations, however it provides a useful platform to inform future research directions to enhance the capacity for policy to be formed from a stronger knowledge base. Future research could focus on building understanding of other boarding options that are available, building a quantitative evidence base of boarding places, programs and providers, and examining ways to build capacity for choice from within communities. Taken together, these findings point to the need to consider the options that are available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children, whether these options are legitimate choices, and whether they are meeting families' needs and expectations.

Acknowledgement

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