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### Giving Voice to First Nations Young People Disengaged from Education in the Northern Territory with a Specific Focus on Barriers to Education and their Aspirations for the Future

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#### Abstract

This paper discusses findings of a phenomenological study completed in 2015, which focused on the perceptions about secondary school from disengaged First Nations youth from a community less than 50km from Darwin in the Northern Territory. The study was informed by aspects of the transformative paradigm as social transformation for this cohort was a driving motivation for the researcher and there was also a desire to challenge the 'norms' in the mainstream education system for these First Nations young people. Ten young people (five male and five female), aged between 15 and 25 who had varying experiences of secondary schools but were not engaged in education at the time, were interviewed. This paper focuses on perceived barriers that prevented them from engaging in education, and their aspirations for the future.

Family and community life, relational issues at school, their own feelings, drugs and alcohol and exclusion were described as barriers to engagement. Future aspirations included employment within their home community and wanting to re-engage with education. There are implications both at a school and policy level from this study. Schools must understand the cultural and family issues of First Nations young people ensuring adequate training of staff and where possible, increasing First Nations staff. Cross-cultural training and training to strengthen staffs' relationships with students is necessary, with specific efforts to engage communities and families. Further, place-based alternatives for educational pathways need to be explored that give heed to local ways of knowing, being and valuing.

**Keywords:** First Nations youth, disengaged, barriers, aspirations, engagement, Northern Territory

#### Introduction

The aim of this article is to reduce the gap in the literature in relation to disengaged First Nations young people's views about barriers to participation and engagement in secondary education and their aspirations for the future. The study was conducted in a small Aboriginal community less than 50km from the central business district of Darwin. If this was another capital city, it would be described as 'rural'. In the Northern Territory (NT) it is described as 'remote'. The article sheds light on why, in the context of this small rural community, young First Nations people choose to engage or disengage. The community could be described as 'disadvantaged' and indeed the myschool website (ACARA, 2017) suggests an ICSEA (Index for Community Socio-Educational Advantage) below 600, well below the norm of 1000 for Australian schools. Many

children in the community could be described as vulnerable (Australian Early Development Census, 2016). Vulnerability and disadvantage are often associated with 'poor' educational outcomes and attendance in remote regions (Turnbull, 2018). This paper looks beyond the 'likely suspects' of disadvantage and vulnerability to consider what young people themselves have to say about engagement.

### **Factors Affecting School Engagement Among First Nations Youth**

There is a combination of complex factors that can affect First Nations students' capacity to attend and engage in school, ranging from social issues that young people face in their home environment to factors at a school level and individual factors (Ockenden, 2014; What Works. The Work Program, 2015; Gray & Partington, 2012; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Some of these factors include students' previous experiences with school, teacher-student relationships, racism, self-perception of academic ability, transition experiences from primary to secondary school and previous achievement at school (Ockenden 2014, p. 1).

In relation to absenteeism in remote to very remote schools Slee (2012) discusses factors such as early education, home life, health, culture, educational infrastructure and pedagogy. Gray and Partington (2012) argue that a significant proportion of non-attendance among Aboriginal students is due to out-of-school factors, with specific gender differences, including families having differing expectations related to boys and girls, and boys being seen as men by around 14 years of age.

The absence of effective relationships between teachers and First Nations students is another school-based issue (Gray & Partington, 2012; Byrne & Munns, 2012; Cox, 2002). Cox (2002) talked to Indigenous adults who returned to education, having dropped out when they were young, with teachers often mentioned as a reason for leaving school (Cox, 2002, p. 10). Cox mentions family environments as creating difficulties in schooling and, while friends made school enjoyable and was a motivating factor for engaging in school, antagonistic peers (including teasing, bullying and racism) was a reason many left school (Cox, 2002). More recent studies have found that there is also an issue with intra-racial bullying amongst Aboriginal children and youth (Kickett-Tucker & Coffin 2011). Cox asserts:

*relationships provided the motivation to be at school, helped to enjoy being there and were the medium of learning. However relationship could also undermine each of these and in doing so, damage educational outcomes (Cox, 2002, p. 8).*

While relationships at school can be helpful, the loss of relationships at home as a result of moving to a boarding school can have a negative impact on students. Bath and Sieita (2018) discuss the impact of trauma as 'fractured connections' causing alienation:

*The essential experience of early trauma has been described as fractured connections with those who would normally provide protection and nurture. But the sense of alienation can also extend to peers, school, the broader community and even to one's cultural roots (Bath and Sieta, 2018, Kindle Location 1089).*

Finally, substance abuse is an issue that impacts upon the alienation of First Nations adolescents from school (Gray & Beresford, 2002). Studies outside of Australia have shown the association between truancy and substance use (Newton, Andrews & Champion, 2014). The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Social Survey (NATSISS) reports that marijuana and alcohol are widely used amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the 2008 NATSISS reporting that a fifth of Indigenous young people 15 years and over used an illicit substance in the previous year (marijuana being most common) (Thomson, Burns, & McLoughlin, 2012).

### ***Aspirations for the Future***

The major theme that emerges from studies that capture voices of First Nations youth in rural settings is that the aspirations are place-based; the future young people are imagining in various locations in the NT and other states is often within the bounds of the local community (Senior, 2012; Herbert, McInerney, Fasoli, Stephensen & Ford, 2014). Osborne and Guenther (2013) suggested that young people's preferred aspirations involved a range of community based employment options and activities such as teacher, clinic worker, office assistant or more general work in the community or being with family. Likewise, Senior (2012) found that young women she spoke to in one NT community mainly aspired to community based employment options. In addition, there was aspiration to "move around" the various employment options as they "might get bored", which was shown to have historical precedent in the community (Senior, 2012, p. 378). Herbert et al., (2014), said that one of the major differences between the responses of very remote and less remote Aboriginal students in regards to their future was that "very remote students reported that they aspired to locally relevant work roles; for example, at the shop, the childcare centre, the health clinic, the school and through the CDEP scheme" (p. 92).

In addition, young First Nations people in remote areas of the NT have the view that the purpose of school or getting an education is to get a job in the future (Parkes, 2013, p. 31; Herbert et al., 2014). This is one of the pervading paradigms of the current education system in Australia and is based on Human Capital Theory (Guenther, Disbray & Osborne, 2014). Human capital is usually understood as the skills and knowledge which contribute to an individual's capacity to generate income, ultimately for the purpose of economic growth (Keeley, 2007 in McRae-Williams, 2014). In this paradigm, according to McRae-Williams (2014), mainstream policy and programme discourse often gives 'having a job' a meaning in and of itself. However, in her study, Parkes (2013) found that for young Aboriginal people from remote areas "dreams about education and employment attainment are secondary to family and are predominantly seen as a way of enabling access to the basics for themselves and family" (p. 24).

A third theme in the literature relates to the pathways involved in obtaining jobs with many young people in this context being unaware or unsure of the process or training they would need (Parkes, 2013; Herbert et al., 2014). Parkes (2013) suggested that while the young people she interviewed broadly recognised education as leading to a particular job or the possibility of money, they did not understand the actual process of how this might occur and what the job might entail. Herbert et al. (2014, p. 89) suggested that most participants from very remote schools were unsure about the training they would need in order to qualify for them.

In conclusion, studies that attempt to capture the voices of First Nations students or young people in rural or remote contexts where country, culture and language are still integral, are few. The data gathered is limited in scope and mainly deals with students who are engaged in the education system rather than those who are not. In fact, Herbert et al. (2014) conclude their report by stating, "the research also prompts significant questions for further study, including what do the Indigenous youth who have withdrawn from school say about the schooling experience and their goals and aspirations for the future?" (p. 93).

### ***Ethics and Methodology***

This study was conducted in a small community (population below 250), less than 50km from Darwin, Australia, 95% of which are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, with a median age of 31.2 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2015). There is a small, government run primary school but no secondary school; therefore young people of secondary age must either commute to Darwin

or attend a boarding school to participate in secondary education. The young people interviewed spent the majority of their secondary schooling in boarding schools.

The research questions underpinning the analysis presented here are: “What are the perceptions of disengaged First Nations youth from one remote community of the NT in regards to barriers to participation in education?” And, “What are their aspirations for the future?” A strict ethics protocol was adhered to including a separate section detailing ethical research conducted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. The Human Research Ethics Committee of the NT Department of Health and Menzies School of Health Research (reference number HREC-2015-2415) and the Tabor Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee permitted the research to proceed. A permit to enter the community from the appropriate Land Council was gained. In order to protect the community and the identity of the participants, the name of the community was not identified and pseudonyms were given for each participant. The approach used for this qualitative study was phenomenological in nature as it places emphasis on the importance of personal perspective and interpretation in order to understand the participants’ subjective experience, and then describes what all participants have in common (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). It is good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard with the insight into participant perspectives being able to challenge structural and normative assumptions (Lester, 1999, p. 3). The research also drew on the ‘voiced research’ approach of Smyth and Hattam (2004) as the desire was for the “inclusion of perspectives previously excluded, muted or silenced by dominant structures and discourses” (p. 24).

The transformative paradigm was drawn upon in that it was the desire for social transformation for a group who have been pushed to the societal margins throughout history (Mertens 2009), namely First Nations people, that was one of the motives for this study. In addition, this paradigm focuses on the “tensions that arise when unequal power relationships surround the investigation of what seems to be intransigent social problems” (Mertens, 2009, p. 10). The investigation of the literature showed that the issue of secondary education for First Nations young people has become intransigent but many efforts to bring about change continue to be driven by the mainstream paradigms of Australian society rather than the hearing of the voices of the primary stakeholders (see Gillan, Mellor, Krakouer, 2017, p. v).

Furthermore, as the study involved First Nations people, it was a necessary protocol to consult with the community through the local council and also engage with a community elder (cultural advisor) to help bring an understanding to cultural context (Hornung, 2013). This cultural advisor, who was already known to the author, also helped to identify which young people would be appropriate to interview.

During 2015, 10 young people (5 males and 5 females) between the ages of 15 and 25 were interviewed. A list of potential participants was created through engaging with the advisor. Participants were not engaged in the education system at the time, but had gone to secondary school for varying lengths of time. Eight out of the ten young people made it to Year 10 or above before dropping out of formal education. None had completed year 12. The young people and their families were approached independently due to the rapport already formed with them from the author’s own involvement in their prior education or from previous community visits. Consent forms were signed by either the participants themselves or their parents/guardians if under 18.

Interviews were conducted in English, one-on-one, using semi-structured questions, in their own community and in various locations, often where the young person felt most comfortable and wanted to be interviewed. The interviews included questions about their family and background,

their school or educational experiences (focusing on secondary education), what worries and concerns they had (barriers to their participation) and their aspirations. The interviews, were voice recorded on an Ipad. Transcripts were written and read to determine the themes. Three young people had a follow-up interview to clarify their answers. The data was analysed using Nvivo software with it coded according to the themes and subthemes that emerged.

Categories were established from the data. Barriers to engaging or remaining engaged in education were categorised as: family or community life, relational issues with others in the system, the feelings of the young people, habits, peer pressure and suspension or expulsion. While not initially the primary focus of the research, the young people's aspirations were important to consider and the themes that were coded included work, independence, education and cultural and community life. Their knowledge of pathways to further education was also explored and lastly, who they saw as role models was discussed.

This study was a small, qualitative study, therefore had certain limitations. Firstly, findings were dependent upon participants' perceptions. Secondly, some information they gave was not verified (such as which schools they attended and for how long). Furthermore, my position as a white, Western, Christian female student researching in a First Nations context means there were barriers with language, culture and power dynamics; their understanding of the questions and what they wanted to communicate was not guaranteed, nor was my understanding of their responses. Finally, there was researcher bias in how their views were communicated in writing, with decisions needing to be made around categorising themes and expression of their perceptions.

## Findings

This findings section aims to highlight the voices of the participants. As a result, only significant quotes will be shared. The full findings can be seen in the full Masters thesis (Walker, 2016). Findings are presented under each of the main themes identified from the data analysis.

### Barriers

**Family or community life.** 'Responsibilities or concerns' for family members was the most referenced theme in relation to challenges for the young people to engage or remain engaged in secondary education. When asked what would make it hard for her to go back to school if she wanted to, Kaylee responded,

*But I'm thinking if I wanna go back school then my mum would have hard time here and my grandmother, she would have a hard time with all those boys in the house, doing nothing sitting around, not helping her, coz she's a very sick old lady and she got heart problem, yeah.*

When Emma was asked what made her decide to leave school her response was, "Well I think it was family most." Issues around fighting and alcohol were the main problems for her family, and when asked what would make it hard for her to go back to school she said she was worried most for her dad and having to look after her little girl.

For five of the young people, homesickness was a reason. Sonia said, "[h]im ok, going to school, easy, sometime hard, you know when you're nervous going first time and you don't want to go, you want to stay home, homesick." Two of the young people just didn't want to go back to school. Harold was attending an urban college (his second secondary school) and when asked what happened to make him leave he said he "didn't like being in the classroom with all the rest of the school kid in that one whole classroom." When asked to clarify, it was revealed that what he



disliked was that there were no other family members in the classroom with him and no one from his home community.

Different younger family members getting bullied at school was also a concern for two of the participants. Kaylee said, *“Like, I was worried they was going to pick on them and start a fight with them, coz I was really worried, yeah.”* Kaylee’s grandmother passed away while she was doing Year 12. When this happened, she decided not to go back to school *“So I went right to Year 12 but then my grandmother passed away so I decided not to go back to school.”*

Madison said there was a lot of distraction happening in her life at the time she dropped out. One of these distractions was a riot that happened that made her family leave the community. *“Coz we had that big riot here we had to leave here...So um, there was a lot of distraction happening at that time... my mum made that choice for us to be safe.”*

**Relational issues with others.** Peer pressure (or “temptation”) was mentioned seven times by three participants. They often talked about “following the lead” of someone. For example, Emma said, *“my best friend actually temptation to run away, so, and I followed them (laughing)”*. Hannah talked about how her *“friends... mucked everything up for me. Walking the streets, like that, giving me bad habits, drinking.”* She also mentioned how, at one school she attended, she was copying her family members who were being “silly”, such as breaking out of her boarding house.

Fighting was mentioned three times in relation to what made young people leave certain schools. When asked what made him leave a particular school, Sean said, *“fights, lots of fights”*. He also mentioned *“friends”* as something that is stopping him from going back to school. He wanted to *“hang out”* with his friends in community rather than be at school.

For three of the young people, issues with an opposite sex relationship was a factor. Jacob was having problems with his girlfriend at school when he left. Hannah left one of the schools she attended because of *“boyfriends”*. One of the reasons Jonathan gave for not finishing school was *“prowling for girls”*.

Sonia said other kids causing trouble was what made her leave a certain school, and in particular, teasing. Emma cited the house parents as the reason she left one school. And Madison would have liked to have completed Year 12 but felt like she needed more support. Jacob was *“having problems”* in Year 10 which resulted in him being *“expelled or suspended”*. Emma enjoyed one school she attended but *“I was just too scared... because all the houseparent used to warn us that there were racist mob there, because every night us and the houseparents used to come out and see a couple of white people hanging around our school”*. Harold ran away from one school but he didn’t know what made him do it. He just *“didn’t like it there”*.

It was mainly these relational issues that led to exclusion from school. Four of the young people mentioned being suspended or expelled from school. Sometimes it was difficult to ascertain whether the young people knew the difference. Jacob said that he wanted to go back to the college he had attended *“but I found out that I was expelled or suspended.”* Jonathan said he got *“kicked out”* of the last school he was at and that he did not try to get into any other schools after that. Sean mentioned how a principal suspended him at one school and another school also asked him to leave. Emma was suspended or sent back home from a couple of different schools and decided to not go back to those schools as a result.

**Feelings.** Four of the young people mentioned jealousy or as they say, “jealousing” as a reason that caused them to have issues that led to them leaving a school. For example, when Madison was asked what made her leave a certain school she said, “too much trouble”. When asked what kind of trouble, she replied, “jealousy”. Again, this was cited as one of the many “problems” that Sonia had at a school she left.

“Worries” were referenced four times. Kaylee explained that when her best friend encouraged her to go back to school she told her that she had “too many worries”. Emma and Jacob gave the reason “boring” for what made them leave a certain school. Two mentioned being “scared” in certain school situations, Emma in relation to racism and Hannah for the fact that she was working in the same classroom as white children. Sonia just “had enough” of school, Kaylee felt “sad” when her grandmother passed away, and Harold felt “shy” because of students from other communities in his class. Sonia also mentioned feeling nervous when first going to school.

**Habits.** Six different participants referred to issues with drugs and alcohol in relation to reasons given for not remaining engaged with secondary schooling. Drugs related to smoking marijuana (gunja) or cigarettes. Hannah explained, “Some kids have bad smoking habits that stop them from their education too, drinking and smoking and smoking marijuana. Well see I got same, when I dropped out of school that’s what happened to me too.” When Jonathan was asked what makes it hard for him to go to school, he replied, “Too much drinking, alcohol, drugs.” Michael started smoking gunja and drinking while at school and said that one of the reasons he left school was because he was “stressing out for more drugs.”

### **Aspirations**

**Jobs.** When asked what they would like to do in the future, most young people had a response that involved some kind of job or work. Emma and Kaylee expressed the desire to help children in school. Two of the young men suggested that they wanted to be mechanics, however one qualified this with “so I can fix my own vehicle up.” Much of the work they wanted to be engaged in involved remaining in the community, such as working in the community clinic, the office, the Woman’s Centre, being a ranger or working at the YMCA or school. Jacob saw his desire to be a ranger as a responsibility as “it is my mum’s land. I have to look after it as I get older.” One just wanted to find work that she liked (in community) without reference to any particular job.

**Independence.** Thirteen references were made related to the young people having some independence in their lives. For example, four of the young people talked about wanting to have their own house. Three of them wanted to live in a different place. Hannah, in fact, wanted to “live long way from family.” And Emma talked about living in Darwin because she had “big plans.” Hannah, Harold and Jonathan would like to have their own car. Sean wanted to learn how to get more money and go to another country. Michael would like to “do my own thing.”

**Education.** Four of the young people said they wanted to reengage with school. Kaylee said, when she thought about it, she would have liked to have gone back to school but did not know how.

Hannah said she wanted to go back to school but at university, “I still wanted to go back to school, even now I still want to, but I just want to do something at university, to do reading and writing again.” Emma mentioned on many occasions about her desire to do Army Cadets and be in the Army Taskforce, “so I really wished I wanted to be Army Cadets you know that Army Taskforce, something like that. I’m thinking to go back to it but thinking probably for my daughter to probably get bigger, probably 3 or 4.”

**Cultural and community life.** The themes in relation to young people's aspirations for cultural and community life were gleaned from both direct questions as well as answers they gave when asked about what they enjoyed or what they have been doing since leaving school.

Three said they have been hunting (and or fishing) in response to the question, 'what have you been doing since you left school', however many of the young people's desire to hunt and fish can be seen in the fact that 6 out of the 10 said the best thing about their family was going hunting and fishing with them. Also, 6 out of the 10 said hunting and fishing were things they enjoyed doing or things they found fun.

Emma, Hannah and Sonia gave birth since leaving school so parenting is significant for these young women. Hannah also looked after another baby while being pregnant with her own. Hannah did a course involving "cultural stuff" in her home community upon finishing school and besides parenting, Emma has been mostly, "walking around a lot" which implies visiting people in the community and hanging out with family or friends.

**Pathways.** The question was asked, "If you would like to learn more, where would you go to get the training you need?" Four of the young people did not know where or how to get the training they would need if they wanted to but, upon further questioning, some would come up with a response. For example Jonathan said he would do a course but asked if he knew where he said, "Na". When asked, "you don't know?" he then responded with "Batchelor." (Batchelor is a town in the NT that has an Indigenous Tertiary Education Institute). Kaylee was "thinking to go back" to school but she didn't know how. Emma said, "I wanna jump on university Lyndal but I don't know how... do you just go ask them?"

Two of them said they wanted to study at university. Emma said, "Well I would go to Darwin if I wanted [some]thing. I wanted to study at university and do stuff there and do a course down there and learn more so I really wished I wanted to be Army Cadets you know that Army Taskforce, something like that." Hannah said she wanted to learn more at university and that she would go to family or a non-Indigenous adopted member of their family for help, "I would go to family, close people like that, like my grandparents." Harold thought he would need to go to university to become a mechanic: "That's where you can learn all kind of things."

Jacob wanted to go back to school and, to work out which school to go to, his mother helped by suggesting he talk to the principal of the primary school in the community to get an enrolment form and to chat about it. But he did not go to see him. His mum was also showing him possible schools on the office computer but "I wasn't too sure, but I'm planning on going back to school." Madison said she would see if there was any training happening in her community, "ask them or they would put a sign up to say we could attend if we wanted to." She said she had done training elsewhere too, such as Darwin and Batchelor, and would travel if she could. She had been doing local health worker training at the clinic "but I just quit then became the receptionist there." She said the reason she quit was because of "too much pressure" from work.

## Discussion and Implications

### Barriers to Engagement

Firstly, in the context of a rural community, it is interesting to note what is not in the data. The young people did not talk about access being a problem. Nor were they lacking in aspiration. They did not describe school as being too hard for them. Nor did they describe themselves as being disadvantaged or 'poor' in any way. These absences in the data speak against commonly held reasons for disengagement in the literature, as noted in the introduction.



The young people's main concerns related to family or community, which is not a surprise given the strong ties to family that First Nations young people have (Gollan & Malin, 2012; Milroy, 2008). In addition, there are certain relational obligations to be maintained which influence the actions of the young people (McCarthy, 2012; Milroy, 2008; Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011). Kickett-Tucker and Coffin (2011) argue that this is part of racial identity: the collective group membership provides safety and security and cultural obligations must be strictly adhered to, which may include fighting when someone in your social or family group needs you to protect what is yours, and being prepared for the physical call to arms. This can be seen by the worries students had for younger relatives at the schools where they were attending who may have been getting teased by others.

Issues in the home community, whether it be related to drinking, fighting, family feuding ('riot'), death of family members or concern for sick family members, become the main focus for young people which makes it difficult for them to concentrate on schooling. For some, homesickness becomes overwhelming and they just want to be at home. This is exacerbated if there are no other family members or people from the community in the school environment. Mander, Cohen & Pooley (2015), in a study conducted in boarding schools in Perth, Western Australia, found that young male Indigenous students who had moved away from remote or regional areas to attend, had to deal with belonging and identity issues, culture shock, homesickness and living in two different worlds.

In addition, relational issues within the school environment are contributors to their disengagement. These can include: fighting with other students, a perceived lack of friends, relationship issues with a girlfriend or boyfriend and unspecified concerns. Many of these issues have roots in the 'feelings' of the young people, for example, 'jealousing' which can lead to fighting. While not specifically related to youth, Frost (2014) gives examples of the violence that is perpetrated by Aboriginal people as a result of what is termed 'jealousing'.

Other feelings of the young people including feeling sad (because of a death of a close family member), shy or shamed, scared (because of a fear of racism), or feeling uncomfortable with white students, are barriers for the young people to overcome, especially if the right support structures are not in place. These feelings can be associated with their overall emotional and social wellbeing. The stressors that First Nations young people face are numerous and they are often trying to cope with several at the same time (Thomson et al., 2012, p. 225; Parker, 2010, p. 6). This is evident with Kaylee who, in the same year, endeavoured to complete Year 12, grieved the passing of her grandmother, tried to navigate worries about family members at school and had pressures from her mother. While none of the other young people reported a death of a family member as a reason for their disengagement, grief, loss and trauma play a significant role in many young people's wellbeing and educational engagement (Thomson et al., 2012).

The social-emotional issues that young people face must be a high priority for schools. The findings reveal their struggles in this area are tied to their families and the cultural obligations associated with them. It is necessary for schools to employ staff who understand the cultural norms of the young people, or if they do not already have the understanding, provide relevant cross-cultural training. Employing First Nations staff and having liaison officers to build bridges between the families and the schools is imperative to help bring understanding to staff around the issues that the young people face within their families. Further, support measures to assist young people in their emotional and social wellbeing need to be strong and well resourced. One such support measure could be formal mentoring, with a growing body of research showing that it can have powerful and lasting positive effects in improving the behavioural, academic and vocational outcomes for at-risk Aboriginal youth (McCalman et al, 2016, p.4). As Madison said,

having an understanding person in the school environment to talk to would have helped her stay in school.

Another consideration for boarding schools is ensuring that more than one young person from a certain community is enrolled and attending at any one time. This may overcome to some extent the trauma associated with the ‘fractured disconnections’ that Bath and Sieita (2018) discuss. While sometimes having other family members in the school can lead to negative issues, having companionship and support helps to alleviate other issues of disengagement such as homesickness and lack of family or friends. There are implications for schools in how they group students in both boarding facilities and classes so that young people feel comfortable in the environment that they are in.

Six out of the ten participants said drugs and/or alcohol were major concerns that contributed towards their disengagement from education. The terms ‘addicted’, ‘stressing out for’ and ‘habits’ were used in relation to smoking (either marijuana or cigarettes) and drinking alcohol. In addition two of the young people related drug and alcohol use to peer pressure saying that their friends got them into it. Although not mentioned by the other participants, the prevalence of cannabis and alcohol use within communities as cited in the literature review, and the pressure to follow others’ lead in this way could have been a contributing factor to their uptake.

Considering this, it would be important for educators of First Nations young people and other staff members to become better acquainted with the signs and symptoms associated with drug use. While schools cannot be expected to rehabilitate young people facing dependency issues, they could be better equipped to help point young people in the right direction towards prevention and recovery, and partner with local agencies and organisations to provide pathways for those desiring assistance and opening up pathways to return to education once they have been through a programme.

Lastly, school based decisions to suspend or expel a student impacts on the engagement or re-engagement of the young people (see also Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 35). The young people seemed unclear on whether they had been suspended or expelled from certain schools using terms such as ‘kicked out’ and ‘sent back home’. Relatively old data from a study in WA found that twice as many Aboriginal students were suspended from school as non-Aboriginal students (Gray & Partington, 2012, ) while the Study Away Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 34) indicated that ABSTUDY (government payments for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students or apprentices) data shows a steady increase, since 2011, in the number of students accessing Fares Allowance to travel home from boarding schools following expulsion. Furthermore, the communication between students, schools and families about the suspension or expulsion is lacking, which was also reported in the Study Away Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). The reasons for suspension and the requirements of re-entry should be made clear, in terms (if necessary the local language) that students and families can understand. In addition, if a school requests a meeting with a family to work through the issues a student is facing, the family may have difficulty accessing the school due to transport issues or other pressures. Again, this is where a First Nations liaison staff member can ensure that both young people and families are aware of their rights and assist in working through the issues of suspension.

### ***Aspirations***

Eight out of the ten young people attained Year 10 or above before dropping out of formal secondary education, therefore had a significant period of time engaged in the education system. Seven of these perceived that the main reason for education was for work or a job. Given that nine of them also said their future aspiration involved a job or some kind of work, there is a sense

that these young people have picked up the ‘script’ that currently pervades our society in relation to education; the primary reason for education is an economic one built around Human Capital Theory (Guenther, Disbray & Osborne, 2014). While it appears the young people know what the dominant paradigm is, there is a disconnect between what the young people say education is for, their aspirations, and the reality of their everyday lives (see also Parkes, 2013). This is evident in the fact that, since leaving school and as of the time of the interviews, only three had engaged in some kind of employment with one in a ‘real’ job and another involved in the Community Development Programme. Two others have been occupied by the work of “minding kids”. McCrae-Williams (2008) found in her research in Ngukurr, NT, that looking after children was not only seen as ‘work’ but often as ‘hard work’ by those who were occupied by it, with paid employment being a hindrance to doing this well. Further, obligatory relationships mean that older children have a protective and caring role of younger relatives (Milroy, 2008), which was seen by Hannah looking after another baby while she was pregnant with her own.

The jobs respondents aspired to, or have engaged in, are mainly community focused. Only one mentioned a job outside of the community as an aspiration. This supports other research conducted with First Nations young people in different regions of the NT (Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Senior, 2012, Herbert et al., 2014). One aspect that Senior (2012) discusses is young, remote women’s aspirations to “move around” the various employment options due to the fear of being bored in the one job. It is not surprising then to see in this study that some of the young people had already ‘tried’ a number of different employment options within the community.

Another noteworthy observation is that seven out of the ten wanted to re-engage with the education system in some way. What is evident is that the young people do not appear to know how they can re-engage, notwithstanding the barriers that make it difficult for them to re-engage. As Emma remarked, she wanted to “jump on university but I don’t know how.” They have seen that there are certain pathways to employment—education is the beginning and beyond that, further training (McCrae-Williams 2014). However, this study shows that they may not be clear about how to get on the pathway. This is also supported by Parkes’ (2013) research with mobile young Aboriginal youth in South Australia and Alice Springs. Furthermore, this pathway concept again is a model derived from western ways of being, knowing and valuing which will mostly benefit those who are able to align their identities, values, beliefs and ways of knowing to this system (McCrae-Williams, 2014). It is based on an individualistic way of viewing the world, whereas the aspirations of the young people are very much in line with their values of looking after kin and country; as Jacob said, “its my mum’s land. I have to look after it as I get older.”

The young people did not perceive ‘access’ to education in their rural environment as a barrier to overcome, but given their desire to stay connected with family and culture and the scarcity of educational alternatives for those disengaged from the mainstream, place-based alternative educational opportunities that respect local ways of knowing, being and valuing need to be investigated. Dialogue and collaboration with local service providers should be a priority as they will most likely become the places of employment for those young people who do aspire to a job.

## Conclusions

The research undertaken gave voice to disengaged First Nations young people's perceptions about schooling. Family and community life, relational issues at school, their own feelings, drugs and alcohol and exclusion were the main barriers to engagement as perceived by the young people themselves. Their future aspirations included employment that was place based and connected them with family relationships. Most wanted to re-engage with education but the pathways to achieving this aspiration were unclear.

There are implications both at a school and policy level. Schools need to take heed of the cultural and family issues of First Nations young people ensuring adequate training of staff and where possible, increasing First Nations staff. Cross-cultural training and training to strengthen staffs' relationships with students is necessary, with specific efforts to engage communities and families. In addition, place-based alternatives for educational pathways need to be explored with the necessary support structures to help them access these pathways and remain engaged once within them. Finally, the ways of knowing, being and valuing for these young people need to be considered when addressing engagement issues in secondary education.

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