Indigenous Community Partnerships Across Country: Questioning what Counts

Erin Hunter
Charles Sturt University
ehunter@csu.edu.au

Jo-Anne Reid
Charles Sturt University
joreid@csu.edu.au

Abstract

A doctoral study of a program designed to provide access to secondary education for children from a remote Indigenous community was completed in 2014 (Hunter, 2015). This paper reflects on the ongoing commitment of members of this community to a partnership that uses interstate boarding schools as a means of educating their children. It reviews the original longitudinal study that sought the viewpoints of the students, families, community leaders, teachers and schools involved, and uses the resources of spatial theory and place-consciousness to argue the inadequacy of standardised understandings of success that are limited to measurable outcomes within short term policy cycles. Such views of success do not account for the effects of locational difference and disadvantage related to the intersection of health, education, and economic disadvantage that underpins ongoing national efforts to 'close the gap' between schooling outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. While the experience of boarding schooling raises unique challenges for Indigenous students, as well as for the schools, teachers and non-Indigenous students who are also part of such programs, there is clear evidence that this form of education also presents valuable opportunities 'both ways', and that such partnerships may assist in efforts to decolonialise curriculum and schooling.

Keywords: *remote; Indigenous; boarding, secondary; school-community partnerships*

> *In the early days of the Sandstone/Sydney program, I had hoped to see Sandstone children completing their secondary education and going onto tertiary education if they wished. However, as students began to drop out of the program, it became apparent that, for most of the children, this was not a realistic goal. […] managing the cultural interface has been the most significant challenge for the students and parents involved in this program, and for many of them, this interface proved to be too daunting to allow them to complete their education in Sydney. (Hunter, 2015, p. 193)*

Introduction

In her longitudinal study of the provision of city education for fifteen Indigenous Australian children from the remote Northern Territory community of 'Sandstone', Hunter (2015) was responding to the challenge of inadequate school education and support services available to students in very remote areas, particularly those who have English as their third or fourth language (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; Holland, 2018). Working with

the Indigenous[1] families, teachers and community leaders who initiated a program aimed to improve educational access, experience and outcomes for their children, her research studied the particular 'case' of the Sandstone students who attended secondary schools in Sydney from 2009-2014. It took place during the time of government commitment to the 'Closing the Gap' strategy that followed the *National Apology to the Stolen Generations* (Rudd, 2008). Like the names given to people referred to in the study, 'Sandstone' is a pseudonym.

At the present time, six years after Hunter's study was completed, the most recent *Closing the Gap Report* (Australian Government, 2020) highlights what it sees as the general failure of the strategy overall and the need for change. And in this community partnership, Indigenous parents are still actively choosing city boarding as a means of giving their children the opportunity to complete secondary schooling and experience life in a context outside of the Northern Territory. Our reflection leads us to honour and respect the choices these parents are making, and to argue the need for government to more carefully attend to the specificity of place (Reid, 2017b) in education policy solutions, and to acknowledge the diversity and difference that is too often elided in large-scale 'rural and remote' policy. For the children of Sandstone, for instance, the 2014 *Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* argued that, in very remote communities like theirs:

> *Senior secondary education, in particular, is largely unsustainable. […] the review found secondary programs without a clear intention to achieve a qualification and with no systematic overall structure, often staffed by teachers with primary school training, responding as well as they could to students seeking a secondary education. […] Students are often only minimally literate, largely disengaged from school, attending sporadically, looking forward to the end of their schooling with little prospect of gaining a formal qualification and in many cases without a realistic chance of gaining worthwhile employment locally.* (Wilson, 2014, p. 11)

In what follows, we review this particular, situated community partnership that began over a decade ago, and which continues into the present day. Our reflection on the study speaks to the conversation about what counts as success (Street et al., 2020), and weaves this thread into the emerging pattern of research findings that can inform policy and practice in remote Indigenous education in Australia.

Research Positioning and Method

We begin by acknowledging the country, the Elders and traditions of the place we are calling 'Sandstone', and those of the Wiradjuri people on whose country we ourselves live and work. As non-Indigenous researchers, it is important to acknowledge our position in relation to the communities in focus here. Erin Hunter is a literacy educator who has worked with members of the Sandstone community since she moved there as a teacher in 2007. Her study was conducted as an ethnographic account of her life and work in Sandstone and then in Sydney, where she documented over seven years the development of a cross-country educational partnership, and its outcomes for the students, parents, schools and teachers involved. Using Nakata's (2007) concept of the 'cultural interface' as a resource to interrogate narrative, interview and documentary data collected across this time, she sought to determine whether the partnership model they developed could be useful for other remote Indigenous students (Hunter, 2015). Co-author Jo-Anne Reid is a teacher education researcher, with a long history of teaching and research in Indigenous education in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. Her focus on theories of practice, place and subjectivity highlights the need for research to move beyond

---

[1] We use the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' interchangeably here, acknowledging that both mark broad categories of political differentiation, and to anonymise the research participants. Neither is historically accurate as a means of identifying the people who lived in different parts of the Australian continent before colonisation.

measurement, and consciously seek to understand and learn from differences – thus interrupting the will for generalised, universal solutions to educational problems.

We both now live and work in Bathurst, New South Wales, although Erin was positioned 'inside' the Sandstone community prior to and during her study, and still maintains strong, often daily connections with community members while running the education foundation for the children who travel across country to Sydney for school. In our roles as doctoral researcher and supervisor from 2009-2014, we were acutely aware that Erin's privileged perspective in the research raised methodological issues of language and power as a non-Indigenous 'insider/outsider' (Smith, 1999) that required her to carefully negotiate her *own* position with 'one foot in both worlds'. While she was no longer teaching the Sandstone students, and in Sydney was an outsider to the City Schools and their educational programs, she has always remained 'inside' the relational dynamics of home and community, overseeing the students' living arrangements. These are a distinctive feature of the Sandstone program. Rather than a school boarding house, their home in Sydney is a place for language to be spoken, community members to stay, and students to be cared for by house carers, in a structured, safe, stable, family-like home environment which is culturally appropriate and is, essentially, a home away from home. Parents consider that this more personalised care is preferable and more suitable for their children. Since the completion of her study Erin has maintained a management role in the small not-for-profit foundation set up to enable the program, and it is from this distance that we are collaborating to review and reflect on the particular nature of the Sandstone program itself. As 'insider' and 'outsider', we come together to test a place-conscious reflection process here, bringing a new theoretical lens to Hunter's study, and reconsidering the factors that appear to have sustained the program over time.

'Place' as a concept has figured in much literacy, environmental, Indigenous and rural education research over the past decade or so (Green & Reid, 2014; McInerney, Smyth & Down, 2011; Nespor, 2008; Reid, 2017b). As an organising principle for social justice and environmental agency, a focus on place challenges research methods that emphasise standardisation and the measurement of short-term outcomes as indicators of success. For non-Indigenous researchers, attention to place helps us *displace* the metronormative assumption of a unitary non-mainstream 'Other', and the use of large-scale standardised testing as the sole measure of quality teaching and learning. Further, in a Levinasian sense, it highlights the importance of learning from the Other (Reid, 2017a): it places us in a position of not knowing, and uncertainty, conscious of *ourselves* as Other. For Indigenous researchers, though, place is 'omnipresent' (Moreton-Robinson, 2003), integral and 'practical' (Martin, 2017) – producing relational and spiritual, rather than merely conceptual, understanding. As non-Indigenous researchers, we believe that attention to the historical trajectory of how particular places have been produced as 'social spaces' (Reid et al., 2010) foregrounds attention to the legacies of colonial annexation of land and culture, and forces us all to 'unsettle non-Indigenous belonging' in Moreton-Robinson's (2003) terms. We cannot forget that, as Marika-Mununggiritj, Maymuru, Mununggurr, Munyarryun, Ngurruwutthun, & Yunupingu (1990, p. 42) explain, "*history stays in the place it is made.*"

After a brief contextualisation of the Sandstone study conducted 'then', we consider the issues it raises 'now', and present a number of individual vignettes which highlight the range and scope of outcomes from the program and question dominant ideas of success. We conclude by addressing the issue of educational success in terms of the need for research and policy to attend to the 'specificities of place' (Reid, 2017b); and go beyond standardised policy and measures of success that do not account for the effects of locational differences (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2018; Green & Letts, 2007; Holland, 2018; Hunter, 2015; Marika, Yunupingu, Marika-Mununggiritj, & Muller, 2009; Roberts, 2014).

Placing the Research

From the outset we need to make clear that our focus here is on *place*, and a very particular group of Aboriginal students whose families live in Sandstone, a community classified as being located in *Very Remote Australia* by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) based on relative access to services. The Sandstone community is strong in its culture, and children are taught lore and knowledge appropriate to their age and gender, on country, from the early years. They already speak up to four local languages before they are enrolled in the government school to learn English. This school was opened in 1969, marking a significant social and policy change from the mission education previously provided to people in the area. As we note below, this school has been noted for its successes. But as in other 'very remote' communities in the Northern Territory, half a century of secular state education has not resulted in the provision of schooling that meets the *Mparntwe* Declaration of national goals for Australian schooling (Education Council, 2019). Students are not provided with an equitable secondary education in the Sandstone community. Therefore, education here is not "*equitable and excellent*" (Education Council, 2019, p. 1). Nor does it ensure that the children of Sandstone can realise their potential as "*confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the [Australian] community*" (Education Council, 2019, p. 1).

Indigenous educators at the Sandstone school have long maintained a commitment to bicultural education, seeking to provide the benefits of 'both ways' or 'two-way schooling' (Yunupingu, 1995), and realised effectively in a range of other locations (Marika-Mununggiritj, 1991). As a primary school teacher living and working in the tiny Sandstone community, Erin had come to know the desert colours and the expanse of the sky and learnt much in the time spent with community women on country. But as Raymatta Marika-Mununggiritj wrote, learning from the Other in this way brings the responsibility of knowledge: "*I have shared my knowledge with them, then they are in a way obligated to me, that we have responsibilities together, which come from the knowledge we have shared together*" (Marika-Mununggiritj, 1991, p. 25).

And so, when Erin was about to leave Sandstone in 2008, and her Indigenous classroom colleague asked if her daughter could go with her so that she could finish school in Sydney, she seriously considered this responsibility. With her mother on staff, this particular child, 'Charlotte', had the 'socio-educational advantage' that Osborne, Benveniste, Rigney, Disbray, and Guenther (2019) have noted among students selected for boarding scholarships from remote areas. She attended school regularly and was progressing extremely well under the *Accelerated Literacy* program (Gray, 2007) recently introduced to the school as state policy. She already had a toehold in the 'other' world. In 2007 she had been filmed for an *Accelerated Literacy* promotion video, having made substantial gains in her literacy proficiency, and was achieving at an age-appropriate Year 5 level. Hunter had lived and worked in the Sandstone community as a teacher for several years by this time and had taught secondary-aged students and the primary years. As well as the cultural knowledge she had gained, she now shared the community's knowledge of the material limitations on education opportunities available in this isolated location. There was no established secondary school in the community, no options in the nearest regional centre, and students who wanted to further their studies needed to travel to a capital city, 1500kms away. With the assistance of the Indigenous Sandstone School Principal and the support of the non-Indigenous Principal of 'Sydney Girls' School', she took up the challenge of finding a way to allow Charlotte to access this very different world. Other parents requested that their children be able to participate in the program that was devised, and it was subsequently extended to include a number of boys from the community, which led to the inclusion of 'City Boys' School' in the program, and created the need to monitor and evaluate its outcomes as described above (Hunter, 2015).

At the time the project began, only one student from this area had completed secondary schooling in the previous 40 years. In addition, the community was subject to the sorts of economic, health and safety issues that are often correlative with the lack of work and substance

abuse that have taken the place of traditional cultural practices – the legacy of historical exploitation that has 'stayed' in this place. At the time, many of the families who lived within the Sandstone community wanted more for their children than what was on offer. They were keenly observing the impact of the Northern Territory's new *Accelerated Literacy* program in the school and wanted their children to be able to read and write the English language to a high standard, in order to be able to interact with outsiders effectively. As Yunupingu had put it in 1989, "*If you have control of both languages, you have double power*" (p. 4). In the context of the 'The Intervention', the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response to the *Little Children are Sacred Report* into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse (Wild & Anderson, 2007), they were also concerned about the need to be fully aware of the political implications of the sorts of government and other support that was offered to them. Elders wanted 'their own' people to be able to critique, consider and respond to policy initiatives brought to the community for consultation, and were particularly aware of the levels of literacy needed for these roles and functions.

Mander (2015) has also found the lack of quality schooling available at home to be a crucial factor for Indigenous parents wanting to send their children away to boarding schools. In this place, too, parents also wanted to protect their children from the effects of the drugs, alcohol, pornography and violence that were all around them. Bobongie (2017), Macdonald, Gringart, Ngarritjan Kessaris, Cooper, and Gray (2018) and Parsons (2019) report this issue in other places too:

> For many Indigenous parents living in rural, regional, and remote communities, boarding is seen as the only viable option for their children to receive a quality education away from the challenges faced by some communities, possibly including exposure to poor health outcomes, high suicide rates, low school attendance and retention rates, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. (Parsons, 2019, p. 156)

Some of the parents in Sandstone explicitly wanted their child to be away from community at certain times. As one parent said: "*I am happy about him there. That he is safe there, that's the most important…*" (Hunter, 2015, p. 252).

What Does Success Like for Students?

Six years after the end of Hunter's study, as applications from Sandstone families to join the ongoing program continue to increase, we suggest that arguments about educational success must be informed by attention to the particularities of place. Rather than generalising policy for all remote places, particularly in relation to the topic of 'boarding schools' as an option for Indigenous children, and in the context of the wide range of research reviewed and underpinning this special issue, we see this paper as addressing Guenther, Harrison and Burgess's (2019a, p. 211) concern that we "*still do not know how the various Indigenous communities throughout Australia; urban, rural and remote measure these learning outcomes **in their own terms**" (emphasis added). At the conclusion of her original study, as Erin's introductory words (above) indicate, a definition of success solely in line with 'Closing the Gap' goals for increasing the number of students completing Year 12 (Australian Government, 2020) might indicate 'failure' from a non-Indigenous, metrocentric perspective. But if physical safety, health and cross-cultural experience are also seen by the community as goals for the program, then a single measure is inappropriate. Like Rogers' (2017a) inquiry into a boarding program for Indigenous girls, the Sandstone study found that children would drop out and then return to the program unpredictably, for instance, often in response to family trauma (Hunter, 2015). This sometimes meant that achieving the goal of ensuring that the students always had a Sandstone community peer, and that they were not 'alone' in their city school, was interrupted. The students' experience in the city was also marked by the effects of the inherent racism that defines Australian society, and, as noted by others researching in this area (Guenther, Lowe, Burgess, Vass, & Moodie, 2019; Macdonald et al., 2019; Moodie, Maxwell, & Rudolph, 2019; Rogers, 2017a), this also affected participation. In the first term, for instance, as Hunter related:

One student, Ben, had a serious fight with another student at school who had been calling him a "gollywog". Ben asked him to stop several times before hitting the boy hard. The other boy had to go to hospital. Sadly, as a result, Ben had to be withdrawn from the school, making him the first "drop-out" from the Sandstone/Sydney program. (Hunter, 2015, p. 199)

In this regard, Parsons' (2019) review of psychological accounts of adolescent identity formation and belonging argues the importance of students maintaining strong connections to home:

Educational research in Australia has found that Indigenous students with a positive viewpoint of both their racial identity and their identity as a student have improved educational outcomes in terms of attendance, retention, engagement, and academic success (Purdie et al., 2000). This embracing of their racial identity acts as a significant protective factor for Indigenous students when confronted with experiences of racism and prejudice (Kickett-Tucker, 2009). (Parsons, 2019, p. 154)

Moreover, as the following longer-term vignettes indicate, success for individual students is difficult to quantify, or even compare.

Anna, for instance, joined the program in Year 7, with literacy levels expected of a student in Stage One, that is, Year 1-Year 2 (New South Wales Education Standards Authority, 2019). The Sydney school placed Anna on an integrated Year 7 program to help her 'catch up' and to make the curriculum accessible to her, as well as to provide her with maximum support. Six years later, Anna was representing the school in softball, basketball and netball. She completed an outstanding artwork representing her journey for her major in the Higher School Certificate, in Visual Arts. This piece now hangs proudly above the reception desk at the entrance to the school. At the Year 12 graduation, Anna received an Award for Courage, as well as an Award for Leadership. After a successful application and interview, Anna received early entry into Early Childhood Education at the Australian Catholic University, her university of choice due to their Indigenous Support Unit. Anna decided to defer this placement and spend 2016 at home with family. However, during the year off her grandfather passed away. Anna was very close to her grandfather; he had attended her major school events in Sydney. Anna was left with the duties of looking after her sick grandmother. Soon after, her mother unexpectedly passed away. Anna remains in remote Northern Territory caring for family and now finds leaving country, where she finds a closeness to family that have passed, very difficult. Is this considered a success?

Chris completed four years in the Sydney program before deciding to complete his schooling in a Northern Territory town. During his time in Sydney he represented the school for many activities, including diving. His teachers described him as a delight to teach, attentive, and keen to learn. He graduated from Year 12, married, and has a child with his girlfriend from school. He currently plays Australian Rules football at a high league level and has many contacts and friends from his time in Sydney. Is this considered a success?

After nearly 100% attendance at his very remote primary school, **Stewart** applied for and received a scholarship at a New South Wales school. Stewart completed nearly two years in the program. Due to his sweet, polite and friendly nature, he was well liked amongst peers and teachers. Stewart's family often struggled to get him from very remote areas to the airport. He was known to have hitchhiked to the airport in Alice Springs, arriving with minimal belongings at the age of 13, desperate to make it back to school. At other times, he contacted volunteers in Alice Springs to come and collect him and take him to the airport, and he would walk out of homes where there was apparent drinking and violence. In the end, it got too hard for Stewart to manage getting back to Alice Springs airport and he ended his time in the program. Stewart has since battled with alcohol and time in prison and has reached out for support from the program managers when things have been really bad. He is currently unemployed in a very remote Northern Territory town. Is this considered a success?

Lacey entered the program in Year 7, after her mother applied for her to join the program. In her six years of secondary education, she did not miss a day of school unless very sick. In Year 7 she received a prefect's award at speech day, in Year 8 she received the principal's award at speech day, in Year 10 she served as a school ambassador, in Year 11 she was a subject captain, and in Year 12 Lacey was the first Indigenous Year 12 prefect at the Sydney School, voted in to the role by her peers. In Year 10 Lacey enjoyed a school tour of the USA. She is about to begin her degree in nursing, a skill she can take back home. Is this considered a success?

Latoya completed 18 months in the program. Latoya always struggled with leaving home. Once she was in Sydney, she always enjoyed her time. She made considerable gains in literacy and numeracy, as well as experiencing success in the sporting arena. Latoya had many weekend adventures around NSW with other girls from the community. The staff and peers were sad to not see her return, and her family desperately tried to get her to come back. However, Latoya preferred being at home, which is something that has always been respected by the program. Is this considered a success?

None of these young people has walked a conventional educational path between the worlds of home and school, and we argue that measures of their success should not be made against a standardised, placeless metric. Such thinking elides the specificities of place even in terms of an issue such as Indigenous Boarding. Rogers (2017b, p. 1) points out, for example, that while these programs are often seen as a solution for students without access to local high schools, "*most Indigenous students at boarding schools are not from remote Australia*". And as even this small selection of vignettes from Sandstone illustrates, generalisations of any kind can be inappropriate.

Discussion

What is valued by people – our understandings of success – is always contextualised by time and place, history and geography, and the meanings that are produced, and 'stay' in particular social spaces (Reid et al., 2010). As Guenther et al. (2019, p. 208) note, this raises complex issues, "*bounded by the uniqueness of particular sites including their histories, economies and location, their interactions with schools and their experiences of educational success and engagement*". Research has consistently argued that it is unhelpful to generalise about rurality and remoteness (Halsey, 2018; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Reid et al., 2010; Roberts, 2014), and it is equally unhelpful, to generalise 'across country' about Indigenous issues (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014). Dominant metrocentric conceptualisations of successful schooling outcomes produce the deficit assumptions around English language literacy, numeracy and school retention that ignore socio-spatial difference and construct these as a problem in and for students because of their Aboriginality. But when seen from the point of view of the community, success in 'two worlds' must be defined 'both-ways'. Fulfilling the cultural obligations important for maintaining their identity when they are on country is as important as completing the assignments and passing the tests that maintain their identity as 'successful' school students. We argue that our best bet in these circumstances is to resist generalisation across place, and learn from the people in place, and perhaps finally hear the words of Mandawuy Yunupingu (1995, pp. 5) when he asked for "*the community spirit [to] drive the education policy – [and] tell the school what [it wants] from education.*"

Reviewing these vignettes with a consciousness of place reminds us of the need to attend to history, knowing that three decades ago Harris (1989, p. 13) told the non-Indigenous education community that "*Aboriginal people are more interested in qualitative relationships than quantitative ones*". There is now an undeniable history of recognised failure in large-scale educational policy, stretching across three centuries in rural and remote Australia (Australian Government, 2020; Green & Reid, 2004; Halsey, 2018; HREOC, 2000; Vinson, Rawsthorne, Beavis, & Ericson, 2015). This highlights the urgency of the need for us to think differently about policy in relation to place (Reid, 2017b), and recognise the significant differences within and among the needs and desires of 'the Aboriginal community'. Corbett (2014) argues that all generalisations

about 'community' are problematic. They can be particularly problematic when the word is used to attribute to Aboriginal people a general desire to privilege outcomes "*such as parent and community involvement, attention to health, safety and wellbeing, local employment, appropriate curriculum and pedagogies and strategies that build engagement in learning*" (Guenther et al., 2019, p. 209), at the *expense* of the mainstream literacy, numeracy, access and employment outcomes that are often also desired simultaneously. 'Having it all', in this sense, is having no more than what non-Indigenous parents want for their children. But as Rogers notes:

> *While away for schooling, it is physically impossible for students to be in two places at once, meaning that there will be times during their school journeys that students cannot be present for cultural and family business. This distance is not only physical, but spiritual and emotional, and one that is made worse by factors such as lack of Indigenous culture in classes, lack of Indigenous support, different expectations at school and home, the pressure to perform parts of one's identity, and a lack of understanding of cultural and sorry business within mainstream boarding schools. (Rogers, 2017a, p. 10)*

Highlighting the commitment of the partnership between the schools and the parents as key to developing this understanding, the Principal of the Sandstone School noted:

> *The students' own language and history and culture are important to the parents of these students. They want these kids to be Aboriginal people. They are happy for them to have an education, but they have to remain strong people in their community about who they are. Set in their own history and culture too. And the parents think you can do both. I actually think you can do both. There are reasonable examples all throughout life that says that both is possible. There are just not enough examples around. (Hunter, 2015, p. 254)*

Even after a short time in the city, their community leaders saw changes in the capacity of the students to walk in both worlds.

From a different point of view, one of the teachers at the City School which the Sandstone boys attend explained the tensions he sees in negotiating the cultural interface, and noted their capacity to manage this as a success:

> *I think they go back home and they see their immediate peers that they have grown up with and enjoy the lifestyle that they've got. But they can see the benefits of coming to Sydney and benefits of Sydney life and the education that they are getting from here and how that will benefit them. Now that they are becoming young adults, it is going to become more and more of a challenge each time they go home. However, every time they come back it is a success and I think they enjoy being here at school.* (Hunter, 2015, p. 367)

Certainly, although outside of the parameters of the original research study, a number of students from the Sandstone community *have* now successfully completed the Higher School Certificate and gone on to further their education. And although each year there are still those who return home before the end of secondary school, the skills and experiences they return with are seen as achievement, rather than as failure. Rogers (2017b) indicates that although only a very small percentage of the Indigenous students attending boarding schools in Australia are actually from very remote communities like Sandstone, 'up to half' of these return before completing their education. Even in quantitative terms, of course, this means that 'up to half' *stay*. Our standpoints are crucial to what we see. And in qualitative terms, while the Sydney schools and teachers in Erin's study saw the return to community as troublesome, interrupting non-Indigenous linear understandings of education practice, parents and family in Sandstone still consider that even a short walk in 'both worlds' is valuable. They see success in the way that children at Sandstone are now expecting to go to high school in Year 7. Some report that the well-being of the whole community has risen as a result of the improved literacy levels of the children, and many families nominate their children for the program years in advance, as an incentive to attend school at home. The first girl to leave Sandstone, Charlotte, who stayed in the

program for five years, yet returned to Sandstone in 2012 before completing Year 10, now has her own children, and she has put them 'on the list' for the program in the future.

Conclusion

The difficulty for 'slow research' that privileges long-term relationships and emergent knowledge gained by anecdotal, qualitative measures is that its findings are not conducive to the policy and funding cycles of systems and governments. But as argued elsewhere (Christie, 2006; Hunter, 2015; Macdonald et al., 2018; Northern Territory Government, 2015; Osborne et al. 2019; Reid, 2017b), all existing measures show that there is no single, universally appropriate response to the 'problem' that is remote Indigenous education. Working at the cultural interface provides challenges for students, staff and families, as well as researchers. Truly inclusive, culturally respectful and responsive schooling remains an ideal in most places, and education itself often fails to connect, inspire and extend (Dreamson, 2019; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013; Martin, 2017; Moodie et al., 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Nakata, M., Nakata, V., Keech, & Bolt, 2012). As this Indigenous community's identity has included an ongoing aspiration for continued access to schooling, and as growing numbers of its young people are able to share their experiences with their peers at home, the Sandstone case leads to similar conclusions as those reported by Macdonald et al. (2018, p. 211), who see the long-term benefits of such education as going beyond Year 12 completion, to include the growth of agency, enhanced employability, and leadership potential within both local and wider communities.

A Sandstone community member has posted this year on the Program's Facebook page: "*Kwer-[map school]-warn anantherr mwerr anthwerr petyek, ntwang kalty-irrem mwerr anthwerr anyenetyek. Anantherr-kenh kwerrern iterrk anyenetyek*". In translation, this message reads: "*Kids come to school, you need to learn, so our spirit can be strong*". The feeling from the students, parents and community leaders inside the Sandstone community, and also the staff in the city boarding schools that have stayed with the program for over a decade, remains optimistic, and there is commitment from all sides to maintaining the program, in spite of ongoing challenge of funding and policy. The particularities of this place, with fewer than eighty children in the whole P-12 school (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2020), means that it seems sensible to listen to parents' point of view in this regard.

We have argued here that for many members of this small community, Sandstone, the cross-country boarding option is both attractive and 'successful' in terms of what the families involved aspire to for their children. Hunter's (2015) findings were similar to those of the other research we have referenced here: in this area there is no single answer, with many studies questioning 'success' and reporting negative as well as positive outcomes for students and communities (Guenther et al., 2019; Macdonald et al., 2018; Rogers, 2017a). But reflection on the sustainability of the program that formed the object of this study leads us to conclude that the perception of boarding schools as beneficial should remain an integral consideration for policy discussion, and we endorse the claim made by Osborne et al. (2019) for more flexible funding options to support children from remote Indigenous communities that listen to, and are driven by, the spirit of each community (Yunupingu, 1995). Government policy responses that remain blind to the differences *within* broad socio-spatial categories, and deaf to measures of learning outcomes in particular places *'in their own terms',* can only continue the history of postcolonial overriding of 'voice, treaty and truth' that characterises this nation (Grant, 2020).

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2016). *The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure*. Canberra, Australia. Retrieved from https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure

Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority [ACARA]. (2020). *My School*. Retrieved from https://www.myschool.edu.au/

Australian Government. (2020). *Closing the Gap Report 2020. Canberra: Australian government.* Retrieved from https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf/closing-the-gap-report-2020.pdf

Bobongie, F. (2017). Ngoelmun Yawar, our journey: The transition and the challenges for female students leaving Torres Strait Island communities for boarding schools in Regional Queensland. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 46(2), 127–136.

Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Carlson, B. (2014). The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian identity within education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19, 784–807.

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2018). *Local Schools, Local Decisions Evaluation Interim Report*. Sydney, Australia: New South Wales Department of Education. Retrieved from cese.nsw.gov.au

Christie, M. (2006). Local versus global knowledges: A fundamental dilemma in 'Remote Education'. *Education in Rural Australia*, 16(1), 27-37.

Corbett, M. (2014). The ambivalence of community: A critical analysis of rural education's oldest trope. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 89(5), 603-618.

Dreamson, N. (2019). *Pedagogical Alliances between Indigenous and Non-Dualistic Cultures: Meta-Cultural Education*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Education Council (2019). *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*. Canberra: Australian Government. Retrieved from https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration

Grant, S. (2020, May 25). Three years on from Uluru, we must lift the blindfolds of liberalism to make progress. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/three-years-on-from-uluru-we-must-lift-the-blindfolds-of-liberalism-to-make-progress-138930

Gray, B. (2007). *Accelerating the literacy development of indigenous students: The National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP).* Darwin, Australia: Charles Darwin University Press.

Green, B., & Letts, W. (2007). Space, equity, and rural education: A 'trialectical' account. In K. Gulson & C. Symes [Eds], *Spatial theories of education: Place and geography matters* (pp. 67-86). New York: Routledge.

Green, B., & Reid, J. (2004). Teacher Education for Rural-Regional Sustainability: Changing Agendas, Challenging Futures, Chasing Chimeras? *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(3), 255-73.

Green, B. and Reid, J. (2014). Social Cartography and Rural Education; or, Researching Space(s) and Place(s), in M. Corbett and S. White [Eds]. *Researching Rural Education* (pp.26-40). New York: Palgrave

Guenther, J., Harrison, N., & Burgess, C. (2019a). Special issue. Aboriginal voices: systematic reviews of indigenous education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 46(2), 207-211. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00316-4

Guenther, J., Lowe, K., Burgess. C., Vass, G., & Moodie, N. (2019). Factors contributing to educational outcomes for First Nations students from remote communities: A systematic review, *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 46, 319–340.

Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education*. Canberra, Australia: Department of Education and Training.

Harris, S. (1989). Culture boundaries, culture maintenance-in change, and two -way Aboriginal schools. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 17(5), 3-19.

Holland, C. (2018). *A ten-year review: The Closing the Gap strategy and recommendations for reset*. Australian Government, Close the Gap Steering Committee. Retrieved from https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/close-gap-10-year-review

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). (2000). *Emerging themes. National enquiry into rural and remote education*. Sydney, Australia: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Hunter, E. (2015). *One foot in both worlds: Providing a city education for Indigenous Australian children from a very remote community – A case study*. PhD Thesis, Charles Sturt University, Australia. Retrieved from https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/publications/one-foot-in-both-worlds-providing-a-city-education-for-indigenous-3

Lowe, K., & Yunkaporta, T. (2013). The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the Australian National Curriculum: A cultural, cognitive and socio-political evaluation. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 33(1), 1-14.

Macdonald, M., Gringart, E., Ngarritjan Kessaris, T., Cooper, M., & Gray, J. (2018). A 'better' education: An examination of the utility of boarding school for Indigenous secondary students in Western Australia. *Australian Journal of Education*, 62(2), 192-216.

Mander, D. (2015). Enabling Voice: Aboriginal parents, experiences and perceptions of sending a child to boarding school in Western Australia. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Special Issue 2 (Red Dirt Revisited: Examining remote learning and education experiences), 44, 173–183.

Marika-Mununggiritj, R., Maymuru, B., Mununggurr, M., Munyarryun, B., Ngurruwutthun, G., & Yunupingu, Y. (1990). The history of the Yirrkala community school: Yolngu2 thinking about education in the Laynha and Yirrkala area. *Ngoonjook*, 3, 32-52.

Marika-Mununggiritj, R. (1991). How can Balanda (white Australians) Learn About the Aboriginal World? *Ngoonjook*, 5, 17-26.

Marika, R., Yunupingu, Y., Marika-Mununggiritj, R., & Muller, S. (2009). Leaching the poison–the importance of process and partnership in working with Yolngu. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25(4), 404-413.

Martin, K. L. (2017). Culture and identity: LSIC parents' beliefs and values and raising young Indigenous children in the twenty-first century. In *Indigenous children growing up strong* (pp. 79-99). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

McInerney, P., Smyth J. & Down, B. (2011.) 'Coming to a place near you?' The politics and possibilities of a critical pedagogy of place-based education. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 3(1), 3–16.

Moodie, N., Maxwell, J., & Rudolph, S. (2019). The impact of racism on the schooling experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: A systematic review. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 46(2), 273-295.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2003) I still call Australia home: Indigenous belonging and place in a postcolonising society. In Ahmed, S., Fortier, A. M., Sheller, M., & Castaneda, C. (Eds.) *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (pp. 23-40). Oxford, UK: Berg Publications.

Nakata, M. (2007). The cultural interface. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36(S1), 7-14.

Nakata, M., Nakata, V., Keech, S., & Bolt, R. (2012). Decolonial goals and pedagogies for Indigenous studies. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society*, 1(1).

Nespor, J. (2008). Education and place: A review essay, *Educational Theory*, 58(4), 475-489.

New South Wales Education Standards Authority (2019). *English Syllabus*. Retrieved from https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/k-10/learning-areas/english-year-10/english-k-10

Northern Territory Government (2015). Indigenous Education Strategy 2015-2024. Retrieved from https://education.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0013/229000/Ied_review_strategy_brochure.pdf

Osborne, S., & Guenther, J. (2013). Red dirt thinking on aspiration and success. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 88-99.

Osborne, S., Benveniste, T., Rigney, L., Disbray, S. & Guenther, J. (2019). Mapping boarding school opportunities for Aboriginal students from the Central Land Council region of Northern Territory. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 48 (2), 162-178.

Parsons, A. (2019). Racial-ethnic identity and academic self-efficacy of Indigenous Australian students studying on scholarships at independent Australian boarding schools—A systematic quantitative literature review. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 13(3), 146-164.

Reid, J. (2017a). Learning the humility of teaching others: Preparing teachers for culturally diverse classrooms. In J. Major & C. Reid [Eds.], *Global Teaching: Southern Perspectives on Teachers Working with Diversity* (pp. 209-229). Dordrecht: Springer.

Reid, J. (2017b). Rural education practice and policy in marginalised communities: Teaching and learning on the edge. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 27(1), pp.88–103.

Reid, J., Green, B., Cooper, M., Hastings, W., Lock, G. and White, S. (2010). Regenerating rural social space? Teacher education for rural-regional sustainability. *Australian Journal of Education*, 54(3) 262-276.

Roberts, P. (2014). Researching from the standpoint of the rural. In White, S. & Corbett, M. [Eds], *Doing educational research in rural settings. Methodological issues, international perspectives and practical solutions* (pp.135-148). London and New York: Routledge.

Rogers, J. (2017a). Photoyarn: Aboriginal and Maori girls' researching contemporary boarding school experiences. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1, 3-14.

Rogers, J. (2017b, June 12). We need to know the true cost of Indigenous boarding school scholarships on communities. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/we-need-to-know-the-true-cost-of-indigenous-boarding-school-scholarships-on-communities-74622

Rudd, K. (2008). *National Apology to the Stolen Generations*. Canberra: Parliament of Australia. Retrieved from https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/apology-australias-indigenous-peoples

Smith, L.T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Street, C., Smith, J., Robertson, K., Guenther, J., Motlap, S., Ludwig, W., Woodroofe, T., Gillan, K., Ober, R., Larkin, S., Shannon, V., & Hill, G. (2020). Exploring definitions of success in Northern Territory Indigenous higher education policy. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1-21. doi: 10.1080/00220620.2020.1719391

Vinson, T., Rawsthorne, M., Beavis, A., & Ericson, M. (2015). *Dropping off the edge 2015: Persistent communal disadvantage in Australia.* Melbourne, Australia: Jesuit Social Services, Catholic Services Australia.

Wild, R., & Anderson, P. (2007). *Ampe akelyernemane meke mekarle "little children are sacred": Report of the Northern Territory board of inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse*. Darwin, Australia: Northern Territory Government.

Wilson, D. (2014). *A Share in the Future: The Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin, Australia: Retrieved from https://education.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file /0020/229016/A-Share-in-the-Future-The-Review-of-Indigenous-Education-in-the-Northern-Territory.pdf

Yunupingu, M. (1989). Language and power: The Yolngu rise to power at Yirrkala School. *Ngoonjook*, 2,1-6.

Yunupingu, M. (1995). *Final report of the national review of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Service. Retrieved from http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/159911.