



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

## Editorial Rural and Remote Boarding

**Marnie O'Bryan,**

*University of Melbourne*

[obryan.marnie@gmail.com](mailto:obryan.marnie@gmail.com)

**John Guenther**

*Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education*

[john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au](mailto:john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au)

**Sam Osborne**

*University of South Australia*

[samuel.osborne@unisa.edu.au](mailto:samuel.osborne@unisa.edu.au)

Policy settings across governments characterise boarding schools using the language of opportunity and choice: boarding schools enable rural and remote living young people to access the best of education systems, irrespective of where they live. The papers presented in this Special Edition test this proposition. Authors from Australia and overseas address the topic of boarding, with a special focus on the experience of remote First Nations communities in Australia and overseas. Their combined insights indicate that where several preconditions are met, boarding schools can transform lives in all the best ways, but where providers fail to consider the holistic wellbeing of their students, great harm can ensue.

The provision of education through boarding has been the subject of a burgeoning volume of research and government inquiry, testing the intended and unintended consequences of schooling away from home (see for example Guenther, et al., 2020). Despite the growth in literature, there has been little focus on policy, or socio-economic outcomes for individuals or communities. There is little that considers theory or philosophy and little that considers costs or compares boarding outcomes with local delivery. There are no publicly available independent evaluations of scholarship programs, partnerships, transition support services, or specific boarding programs. There are no quantitative research papers. These are issues which affect non-urban populations everywhere, not just Australia. Each article presented here contributes to strengthening the existing evidence base and offers suggestions to improve policy and practice for rural and remote students.

Lloyd, from his unique perspective as a member of the Northern Territory Department of Education's Transition Support Unit, discusses a case example of a partnership between a remote community in the Northern Territory with a boarding school in South Australia. His paper indicates that, done right, Indigenous boarding programs can create opportunity and expand the cultural and educational horizons of young Australians through a genuinely two-way exchange of knowledge and expertise. Similarly, Hunter & Reid's longitudinal case study of a remote community/urban school partnership speaks to the central importance of authentic relationships.

The authors challenge metrocentric understandings of ‘success’, arguing that the benefits of education engagement facilitated by the partnership here cannot be adequately recognised by reference to a one-size-fits-all scale of achievement. All three authors acknowledge the organic and relationally-driven foundations to the partnerships they describe.

That such underpinnings can be applied at scale is demonstrated in Finnan’s ethnographic study of the largest residential school for First Nations’ students in the world. A school of more than 27,000 students is inconceivable in an Australian context, but that is the student population of the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) situated in Odisha, central India. The author acknowledges the many pitfalls which can beset young people separated from family, community and culture and resident in a ‘total institution’, but concludes that on balance the school manages to live up to its mandate as a “*castle of hope*”.

Finnan cautions that educators must be attuned to the needs of those students who might “*fall through the cracks and leave the school ill-equipped for life in either the mainstream or the village*”. Her concerns are echoed by other authors in this Special Edition, who focus on the health, and particularly mental health, implications of boarding at schools away from home.

Rutherford, Britton, McCalman, Adams, Wenitong, & Stewart draw attention to the fact that the attendance of many Indigenous adolescents from remote communities at boarding schools creates a need for these schools to prioritise and proactively create opportunities that build and nurture student resilience. Their paper reports findings from a participatory action research project which set out to develop and implement a two-year STEP-UP intervention with boarding schools, designed to create supportive environments for improving the psychosocial resilience and wellbeing of remote-living Indigenous students. The research team identified six resilience building domains as key elements that influence student resilience and social and emotional wellbeing at school: valuing culture and identity; developing cultural leadership; nurturing strong relationships; social and emotional skill building; creating a safe and supportive environment and; building staff capacity. Their work provides guidance and support for school leaders to prioritise and plan for meaningful actions, at both a school policy and budgeting level, as they invest in building the capacity of staff to provide appropriate support for First Nations students.

Similarly, Lester & Mander’s paper investigates the mental health and wellbeing of students transitioning to a boys’ only boarding school. It uses longitudinal data to investigate the social, emotional and mental wellbeing of boarding and non-boarding students following involvement in a ‘Connect Programme’ during the transition from primary school to secondary school. Findings suggest the intervention was successful in minimising the differences in factors associated with academic, emotional and mental wellbeing between boarding and non-boarding students at three months and 6 months post-transition. The work highlights the importance of transition programs in the promotion of a positive sense of wellbeing.

Gaining an understanding about non-cognitive aspects of what contributes to achieving success at school is foundational to setting students up to succeed (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018). In particular, fostering a sense of belonging has been shown to be an important schooling outcome in its own right, and for some students, is indicative of not only of educational success, but also of long-term health and well-being (OECD, 2004) . It is concerning, therefore, that First Nations young people in Australia report significantly lower levels of belonging at school than their non-Indigenous peers (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018). Whettingsteel, Oliver & Tiwari take statistics such as these as the starting point for an investigation of how the built environment can impact a student’s sense of belonging at school. The findings of this Participatory Action Research suggest that interior design and spatial perspectives have a role in facilitating increased positive experiences and educational outcomes for First Nations students.

Finally, Guenther and Osborne's paper focuses on the persistent problem of lack of education opportunity available to remote living families. Faced with a choice between sub-optimal local provision and secondary schools 'off country', parents are ill-equipped to fully endorse the type of education their child should receive. Forced into sending children to boarding schools which may or may not provide any degree of cultural safety and where curriculum does not typically embrace the cultural and linguistic heritage young people bring with them to school, 'choice' becomes an ontological issue, going to the very heart of identity.

Our two Rural Connections papers provide perspectives from boarding providers in remote and urban parts of Western Australia. Mander & Hasking's Rural Connections paper reflects on the experience of practitioners working at the coal face with First Nations boarders far from home. The authors present a developmental and mental ill-health perspective on the transition to secondary school for boarding students, where mental ill health refers to a range of sub-clinical problems that can impact on how individuals feel, think and behave. They draw attention to the lack of knowledge of the antecedents and types of risk factors that may contribute to mental ill-health among young people who school away from home and family, particularly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students. The paper is a 'call to action' for practitioners and policy makers to better recognize the prevalence and severity of mental ill-health amongst boarders and to develop culturally informed and responsive practices. In particular, the authors encourage service providers to reconceptualise boarding school as a 'window of opportunity' to offer positive intervention and prevention for young people experiencing or at risk of mental ill-health or mental illness.

Lobb, in his Rural Connections article, distils principles of powerful engagement in a remotely located boarding facility, into "*The 4 R's*": respect, responsibility, reciprocity and relationship. Those factors are evident as the cornerstones of a school-community partnership also described by Lloyd in his research paper.

The papers in this Special Edition speak to the potential for boarding schools to contribute to the empowerment of rural/remote living and culturally oriented young people. They speak also to the central importance of relationship, and the heavy cost of failing to engage with the wider context of students' lives. That the issues raised here are of particular importance in the Australian context is highlighted by continued policy reliance on boarding schools in preference to investing in secondary programs in rural and remote areas.

The topics covered here demonstrate some of the fundamental weaknesses of an educational model that causes secondary problems which in turn need to be solved—from mental health and wellbeing concerns (Lester & Mander; Mander and Hasking), to a need for belonging (Whettingsteel et al.) to interventions designed for resilience-building (Rutherford et al.), to fundamental principles of partnership development (Lloyd) to issues related to access (Guenther & Osborne). The case for boarding as a vehicle for equitable education delivery is yet to be made and the benefit of boarding schools for rural and remote students, and the communities they come from is yet to be demonstrated. The 'hope' of boarding, picking up on Finnan's title, remains just that for many students and their parents. But the papers certainly do point to hope being realised for at least some (Finnan; Lloyd; Hunter & Reid; Lobb) and this should give us some confidence that learnings from research are being translated into better policy and practice.

What also stands out from this set of papers is the disproportionate impact of boarding on First Nations families living in rural and remote contexts. The papers challenge policy makers and practitioners to look with fresh eyes at the barriers to engagement which face too many First Nations families and young people in the education system. The First Peoples of this land are custodians of diverse and globally significant knowledges. We are all the poorer when education systems fail to support their maintenance.

## References

- Australian Council for Educational Research. (2018, 7 June 2018). *Research shows many Australian students feel they 'don't belong' in school*. Retrieved from <https://www.acer.org/id/discover/article/research-shows-many-australian-students-feel-they-dont-belong-in-school>
- Guenther , J., Benveniste, T., Redman-MacLaren, M., Mander, D., McCalman, J., O'Bryan, M., Osborne, S., Stewart, R. (2020). Thinking with theory as a policy evaluation tool: The case of boarding schools for remote First Nations students. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 20(1), 34-52. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1035719X20905056>
- OECD. (2004). *Learning for Tomorrow's World. First results from PISA 2003, Programme for International Student Assessment*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.