“We let ‘em go!”:
Transition from Remote Community to Boarding School: The Lockhart River Experience

Richard Stewart (B.Ed., M.Ed., M.Ed. Leadership)
James Cook University

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Abstract

The research described here used qualitative research methods to investigate the experience of the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities for Year 6 students, their parents and care-givers and community members from the remote Indigenous community of Lockhart River in Queensland, Australia. Drawing on social constructivist principles and the rich traditions of phenomenological inquiry, the research occurred 'on the ground' in community and involved extensive community collaboration and support. It provides an authentic and detailed picture of the transition experience and reveals the complex and contested nature of the 'space and processes' which provide the only means by which students from this remote Indigenous community can currently access a quality, comprehensive secondary education.

On the advice of community members who helped to shape the conduct of the research, semi-structured interviews in both individual and group settings were chosen as the primary means of gathering data relevant to the transition. These interviews occurred in a range of community settings before, during and after the first year of the movement of the Year 6 cohort into Year 7 and secondary school away from home and provide a unique range of perspectives on what is a complex transition process for both students and their parents and care-givers.

Through the process of thematic analysis of the interview data, a number of key themes, some of which reside in what occurs in the remote Indigenous community context before, during and after the transition process and some of which reside in the operation of the boarding schools and residential facilities, have emerged to shape and create a picture of a phenomenon which has been a feature of community life for as long as people can remember. Indeed, through their participation in the research, a number of older adult participants were keen to share their experiences of boarding in what they referred to as 'the dormitory days' or 'the mission days.'

In recent years the transition space has attracted significant attention both from the research sector and from governments with a range of inquiries, reviews and from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It is increasingly clear from both this research and from the growing body of relevant literature that the transition to boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities is a complex and contested space where scope exists for the implementation of policies and practices drawn from recent research evidence. The dissertation concludes by examining the potential for changes in current policy settings which have the capacity to support an improved educational experience and subsequent education and life outcomes for Indigenous students from remote and very remote communities across Australia as they leave home to access the quality, comprehensive secondary education not available in their home communities.

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Chapter 1: Leaving Home

1.0 Introduction

The dissertation begins in this section by providing a brief description of the context in which the transition from primary school to secondary boarding schools and residential facilities occurs for a group of Indigenous students from a remote community in Queensland, Australia. This is followed by a description of the researcher's positionality in section 1.1 and an outline of the range of personal and professional experiences that have served to provide the motivation for the conduct of the research described here and to shape the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the research.

At the end of January 2016, just prior to the start of the school year, I was in the remote Indigenous community of Lockhart River, 800 kilometres north of the city of Cairns on the north east coast of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, Australia (Figure 1.1) undertaking the first of a series of interviews with students, parents and guardians and community members who had agreed to participate in this research project. As will be shown, the research project grew out of a relationship with community members that began five years previously through my work in supporting a range of Australian government-funded community engagement initiatives.

While in the community I both observed and interacted with staff from the Queensland Education Department Transition Support Service based in Cairns, who had flown into the community to work with families in the support students who had completed their primary schooling and were preparing to take up a place in a boarding school or residential facility far away from their home community. The students, sometimes accompanied by parents and guardians acting as escorts, make this journey in order to access what is regarded as the quality, comprehensive secondary education that is not available in their home community. They seek what is perceived to be the 'good education' available only through attendance at a boarding school or residential facility that brings with it the prospect of a life lived in contrast to what is portrayed as the entrenched and generalised disadvantage at all levels that characterizes much of remote Indigenous Australia.

In many ways it is viewed by the dominant Australian society that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of remote Australia must seek to engage in formal Western education, often well away from their home communities, as a means of bringing about improvements in their social condition. This view, which frames much of the current policy and political discourse in this space is exemplified by Griffiths (2011) who stated that:

Education is central to the economic, physical and cultural wellbeing of all people and communities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are no exception to this. Indeed, a good education for every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child in Australia would see improvements not only in tangible education-related outcomes such as literacy, numeracy and job readiness, but also in health, self-esteem and social status (p. 69).

Figure 1.1: Lockhart River Community

At this time of the year, Lockhart River community is only accessible by air or by sea and in the stormy thunderstorm weather so common in the Wet Season, air travel can also be become highly problematic. The 'Wet' commonly makes both the Peninsula Development Road, which runs from Cairns to the tip of Cape York, and the Lockhart River access road impassable. It is not uncommon for floodwaters to block safe road access until at least the end of April each year.

In this movement of students away from community to attend secondary schools in major urban and regional centres at the start of each year and the start of each subsequent school term, Lockhart River community mirrors a scene replicated in remote and very remote Indigenous communities across Australia. The fact of limited or non-existent access to secondary education makes the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities the norm for many students and the families and communities who support them. In Queensland, an estimated 1,200 students leave remote Indigenous communities in Cape York, The Torres Strait, the Gulf of Carpentaria and Palm Island to attend boarding schools and residential facilities.

As I observed the Transition Support staff in their work with students, parents and guardians and community members, I was forced to reflect on the enormity of the transition being undertaken. Older high school students, who had made the journey many times before, appeared confident as they prepared to board aircraft of varying sizes for the first part of the flight to Cairns, while the Year 7 students who were leaving to start their secondary journey so far away from community displayed a range of emotions from nervousness to excitement. They were starting on an education pathway that demanded an ability to navigate a complex transition in terms of place, culture and language: a transition that many young students from Lockhart River and other Indigenous communities throughout remote Queensland and remote communities across Australia had previously undertaken without the hoped for success as measured by student retention at secondary school and completion of

Year 12. The successful transition to secondary school away from remote communities to boarding schools and residential facilities has the capacity to exert a significant impact on the education and life chances of remote Indigenous students however it is clear that for many students the transition can be problematic.

In 2012, the year before this research project began, no student from Lockhart River completed Year 12 and while there is no publicly available data relating specifically to Year 12 retention for remote boarding students, anecdotal evidence would suggest that a student leaving the community to begin their secondary education is more likely to disengage before Year 10 than they are to complete Year 12.

1.1 Author Positionality: An Introduction

It is important at this early stage that I locate myself as researcher within the study and describe the range of experiences that have shaped my understanding of the transition space. My awareness of and interest in the issue of the transition of students from remote Indigenous communities to boarding school comes from a range of diverse professional experiences which have exposed me to the complex range of factors which impact upon the experience for children, their parents and care-givers and their home communities. The impact of my position as a non-Indigenous researcher working with Indigenous people in community and how this shaped the nature and conduct of this research will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

As I write this dissertation, I am currently working as the State Program Manager of the Transition Support Service for the Queensland Education Department of Education. The work involves supporting students from remote Indigenous communities in Cape York and Palm Island who leave their home communities to attend secondary boarding schools and residential facilities throughout Queensland. However, my interest in this area of Indigenous education did not initially stem from what I am engaged in at present, though obviously it and a range of other experiences that I now will outline, continually inform my thinking. These experiences and my reflections on them work to shape my evolving view of the contextual factors that serve to shape the experience of the transition for all those involved. It is therefore important to outline the professional chronology which has brought me to this point.

1.2 A Papua New Guinean Perspective

My first experience of boarding education came while working as an Australian volunteer teacher in a remote part of Madang Province in Papua New Guinea from 1986 to 1988. St Michael's High School was home to over 600 boys and girls from many towns, communities and villages across northern PNG. Circumstances dictated that at the end of 1986 I went from being a teacher at the school, to being the Acting Principal, a position I held for two years.

At a time when Papua New Guinea was still striving to achieve universal primary education, a place in a secondary school was in most cases highly valued by both the student, their family and the broader community. At that time in Madang Province, only 60% of students who completed Year 6 were selected to attend secondary school. Selection into secondary school was made on the basis of a series of externally assessed examinations. At the end of Year 8, only 60% of students went on to Years 9 and 10. Again, progression through school was on the basis of external examinations. When it came to selection for Years 11 and 12 as part of the National High School network, fewer than 20% of students made the cut. A place in a secondary school was seen, from my perceptions of the PNG people, to be of value. Rarely, if ever, were there any vacancies in secondary school and when these vacancies were advertised, they were always taken. Put simply, the demand for secondary school places exceeded the capacity of provincial governments and the national government to supply these places.

It was rare for students not to return to school after term breaks, and the most common reason for failing to do so was an inability to pay school fees. For many parents and care-givers who were subsistence farmers, annual school fees comprised a very significant part of annual disposable incomes. It was my experience that most students attended classes diligently and worked hard in the school's extensive agricultural programs. The majority of students took advantage of the opportunities that secondary school provided, and I left Papua New Guinea with a view that education was seen by many as a way out of poverty and an important precondition for success in later life. In the minds of the people of Papua New Guinea, with whom I lived and worked, this was a view which was almost universally shared.

1.2.1 The East Kimberley

Exposure to living and working in a remote Indigenous community in northern Australia came some years later when I moved with my family into a remote Aboriginal community in northern Australia. I entered into the work with a view that my experience in Papua New Guinea would stand me in good stead for the work in the remote Indigenous context. While elements of remote living were familiar, the work was not. Of the secondary cohort for which I had responsibility, the average daily attendance was less than 50%. Many of the older students had at some stage been away to boarding schools in either Perth or Darwin, but no student who had grown up in the community had completed Year 12. Those who attended school generally did so because of pressure from parents or care-givers, generally grandmothers.

By comparison with the students I had worked with in Papua New Guinea, there appeared to be little overt enthusiasm for education. The supports were there in terms of facilities which were far superior to those in Papua New Guinea and there were many opportunities for government funded and corporate support if students wanted to attend boarding schools. What surprised me in terms of the

boarding school transition was that in three years (two in education and one in community administration) in that community, I had no face-to face-contact with the staff of any of the urban or regional boarding schools attended by community students.

Community engagement appeared to consist of faxes and phone calls as part of the student enrolment process and faxes and phone calls at suspension and expulsion time. The majority of the students I worked with in the secondary program spoke disparagingly of their experience at boarding school, finding it to be fun at the outset when all the interesting things took place at the start of the term but ultimately to be restrictive and alienating. Eventually they all made their way home, either forced to leave or having made the decision that boarding school was not for them. Either way, no one finished Year 12 and on my return to the community in 2001, five years after leaving, I discovered that the situation was almost exactly the same. For the children of this community, secondary education through attendance at boarding school was in large part an experience of failure, and this failure was accepted as the norm and went largely unchallenged by parents, guardians and the broader community.

1.2.2 Darwin

Three years later I began work in secondary education in Darwin as Head of Campus of a large day and boarding school with a significant Indigenous enrolment. It was here that I first experienced firsthand what is referred to as 'the churn.' Students from remote Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory, the Kimberley region of Western Australia and the Gulf region of Queensland appeared at the school at the start of the year or start of a term, only to disappear in large numbers before making any real inroads into their secondary education. A very small minority managed to stay the course and finished Year 12 with an acceptable level of certification. The vast majority returned home, with nothing other than an experience of educational failure and alienation.

In short, children appeared unprepared for the reality and challenges of the transition from life and education in a remote community to life in a boarding context. Compounding this, a significant number of boarding and teaching staff appeared to be totally unprepared for the work involved in working effectively and relationally with the students from remote communities who were in their care.

1.2.3 East Arnhem Land

Following on from the work in Darwin, I worked for two years in a remote Arnhem Land community in the Northern Territory. In both theory and practice, the community was said to offer a Year 12 education which was comparable to that available to students across the Northern Territory, including those in larger urban centres. The reality was that Year 12 completion with any externally recognized level of certification was rare. Attendance levels at secondary school in the community were as low as anywhere else in the Northern Territory and many students spent their days at play in

the community and living a life with few of the boundaries that their age-peers in mainstream secondary education were constrained by.

My work there was in community administration and employment and training, but I maintained a close interest in the education space, partly because my role as Chief Executive Officer for the local Indigenous Council demanded that I have oversight of the Council-run Centrelink Office. Centrelink staff were responsible for the administration of the Abstudy support payments and the travel arrangements that allowed secondary school students to access secondary education outside their community in a range of schools in both the Northern Territory and Queensland. Rather strangely it seemed to me that the majority of these students were bound for a boarding school just north of Townsville. I met with the Principal and senior staff of this school during their visits to secure enrolments and was at the airport when chartered planes paid for through the Abstudy program would land in the community to pick up students of secondary school age, many of whom had been enrolled only one or two days before, to begin the long journey via Darwin to their secondary school in North Queensland.

In the diary I kept during my time in this community I reflected on the ethics of sending children from a remote community to a school so geographically and culturally distant. To me, there were no surprises when the vast majority of these students were back at home before the year was half over, there having been, from my perspective, no real and respectful communication between the school and parents and care-givers in community. The churn of students that I had experienced when working at the boarding school in Darwin was replicated as students made the move from their home community to boarding schools and Darwin in Townsville and back again.

1.2.4 Commonwealth Program Administration: The Impetus for the Research

While experience in the context of the remote Indigenous community provided me with an understanding of the context from which children move to complete their secondary education, the motivation for wanting to examine how the transition was experienced by the participants involved, especially the students and their families, came from my work in program management while working for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations in Cairns between 2008 and 2012. Primarily responsible for the administration of a range of Commonwealth Indigenous education programs in Cape York and the Torres Strait, I was heavily involved in the management of a range of programs in education and youth employment that were run from an almost exclusively Indigenous school just outside of Cairns.

In mid-2010, in the company of senior officers of the department, I attended a meeting with the senior staff of this school to monitor why so many junior secondary students appeared on the enrolment records of one college campus which was designed to cater almost exclusively for students in Year 11, Year 12 and Year 13. When the question was posed, no member of the college's

administration could offer a satisfactory response but an assurance was given that the situation would be remedied.

Some six weeks later a further meeting was scheduled. Administration staff, including the College Principal, presented data which showed that only senior secondary students were now enrolled at the senior campus. The logical assumption to be drawn in such a situation would be that the junior secondary students in question had been moved to the other campus to continue their education. When the head of the senior campus was asked where the junior secondary students in question had gone. His response was, "We let 'em go!"

The students in question had been sent home to their communities in Cape York, the Torres Strait and the Northern Territory. Later investigations would reveal that many students from both campuses of this particular school had, at various times, been expelled, suspended or just "let go" without any fair, transparent or defensible process. Indeed, some were simply dropped off at a homeless men's shelter in Cairns while others arrived unannounced at airstrips in their home communities without any prior communication to parents or care-givers. Many of these suspended or excluded students remained on the school's enrolment well after they had returned to community, a fact that would some years later see the Principal charged with enrollment fraud.

This episode brought home the sharp reality that there was something seriously amiss with the transition experience for a significant number of Indigenous children from remote communities. Not only did the data appear poor in terms of satisfactory completion of school, but I had begun to form the view that many young people were being subjected to an experience which was culturally alienating to both the students themselves and their parents and care-givers in community. In the context of this school, the transition to boarding was a process which, with few exceptions, appeared to fail children and it would be difficult to imagine the same scenario being played out with non-Indigenous children attending boarding schools in Queensland or anywhere else in Australia.

The exclusion of these students, who came from a number of remote and very remote Indigenous communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory, coincided with a series of visits I had made to the remote community of Lockhart River during which parents, guardians and a number of community residents expressed their concerns at what was happening to their children who were attending schools with an almost exclusively Indigenous enrolments and from which they were graduating with what one parent described as 'a certificate that said they had gone to that school.' I was left wondering how students, their families and communities viewed this experience. Suspensions and exclusions were conducted without appropriate communication to parents and guardians and, in most cases, left them feeling both frustrated and powerless.

The recurring question for me during visits to Lockhart River and a number of other remote communities in Cape York and the Torres Strait was how education, in particular the transition to

secondary boarding education, was ‘working’ for the young men and women of these communities and communities across Australia.

Over the course of a number of visits, I had the opportunity to engage in lengthy discussions with community members about children who had left the community to go to secondary school. Early observations of the 2012 data revealed that there was a distinct possibility that no student from Lockhart River would complete Year 12 in that year. Indeed, nearly half of the students who left the community at the start of 2012 to attend boarding school were back in community and disengaged from formal education by the end of Semester One. Parents were unable to account for why this situation appeared to be the norm. Many felt frustrated by a system that promised so much in terms of creating opportunities for children that were not available in community but which appeared allowed schools to exclude their children for reasons that appeared to be either trivial, punitive or a combination of both. For a number of parents and care-givers, the sense of powerlessness that emerged from their discussions regarding the experience of their children in transitioning to boarding was quite palpable.

1.2.5 AFL (Australia Football League) Cape York House Cairns

Between September 2012 and the end of October 2015, I worked as General Manager of AFL Cape York House in Cairns , a new facility built to provide residential care to young secondary school aged students from a range of remote Indigenous communities in the Gulf, Cape York and Torres Strait regions of Far North Queensland. During the course of 2013 I also completed my Confirmation of Candidature and began preparation for the conduct of the research.

The residential facility was the first of its type to be opened in Australia and the opportunity to play an important role in the development and implementation of this model of residential and educational support presented a unique challenge. The day to day running of the facility provided me with an opportunity to observe at first-hand what the transition to secondary school away from community involved for students and for their parents and guardians. I was able to see, every day, how students from a number of remote communities experienced the transition, and I had the opportunity to work with the children and families impacted directly by the move of Year 7 into secondary school in Queensland at the start of 2015.

The work gave me direct ‘insider’ experience of the phenomenon which I had chosen to explore as a researcher and also allowed me to experience how the many diverse elements of the transition process worked in combination to shape the context in which the transition occurred. Living and working with at close quarters with young people in the transition space also brought me into direct contact with the workings of the Australian government Abstudy program which supported the residential and travel costs of the transition to boarding. The work also allowed me to develop a thorough understanding of the work of the Queensland Education Department Transition Support

Service which provided a range of in-community and in-school supports to children in transition. The ability to work directly in the residential and educational elements of the transition space while undertaking much of the preparation for the conduct of the research gave me a depth of understanding of the complexity of the transition that I would not otherwise have been able to attain.

1.2.6 Wadeye Community: Kardu Darrikardu Numida Hostel

The completion of my work with AFL Cape York House provided me with the opportunity to work for much of 2016 in Wadeye (Port Keats), a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory. My work as the Head of Boarding at the hostel for secondary students in Wadeye allowed me to experience the transition to boarding from a range of unique perspectives (see Appendix A).

Built with the intention of being a regional boarding facility, the hostel only provided accommodation and out of school learning support for students from within the community who attended the school next door. This unusual set of circumstances forced me to reflect on the policies (or lack thereof) that had supported the construction of the facility and the degree of engagement that had occurred both within Wadeye and the surrounding Indigenous communities prior to the facility being built. Media controversy regarding the construction of the hostel is highlighted in Appendix A. Many parents in Wadeye wanted to send their children away from the community to boarding schools in Darwin and other centres, including Townsville and Cairns. Where this occurred, it was rarely successful and most students returned to Wadeye after less than a term away from the community. The experience of Wadeye served to further deepen my understanding of the complexity of the transition context and shaped my perspectives both as a practitioner working in the space and as a researcher. It was apparent that student experiences with boarding were strongly influenced by factors external to students themselves and their families. Understanding this interaction was vital for me, both as a boarding supervisor and as a researcher motivated to inform both policy and practice. Working outside the Cape York and Lockhart River context in a community where there was no external form of transition support and where boarding providers from within the Northern Territory and from Queensland seemed to be able to enrol and then exclude students with no form of accountability to students, their families or the wider community provided cause for deep personal and professional reflection. The experience reinforced the need for there to be rigorous research of the transition space which could serve to inform policy and therefore improve the opportunities for successful secondary engagement for remote Indigenous students. In short, the Wadeye experience deepened my understanding of the power imbalances in the space which had served as the primary motivation for the conduct of this research.

1.2.7 The Queensland Transition Support Service

My current work as the State Program Manager for the Queensland Education Department Transition Support Service commenced in late January 2017. The position involves working with

primary school students and their families in remote Indigenous communities in Far North Queensland as they prepare to take up places in boarding at the end of Year 6 and working with students who are enrolled in boarding schools and residential facilities throughout Queensland. In my work as a public servant, manager of boarding facilities and as a researcher, I had observed the work done by the Transition Support Service and I viewed their role as critical to the success of the transition to boarding, especially for the Lockhart River community.

The work I lead in supporting the transition of children brings together a range of experiences and serves to further enhance my understanding of the context in which the transition occurs.

Working with remote community students, their parents and guardians, remote community schools, a range of boarding schools and residential facilities and a number of government agencies presents a unique perspective on an area of Indigenous education that has, in my view, undergone significant expansion in terms of the number of students who leave their remote home communities to attend secondary school but little apparent structural or policy change since my first experience of remote Indigenous students going away over 25 years ago.

1.2.8 Reflection: My Experiences Drive Me

The motivation for wanting to examine in great detail the experience of students who leave the Lockhart River community in Far North Queensland to attend boarding schools and residential facilities well away from home, comes from a range of professional experiences that either directly or indirectly touch upon the transition process. The motivation is driven by a set of deeply held values and beliefs that have, at times, been challenged by my observations of and participation in events related to the problematic transition of children from remote Indigenous communities to boarding schools and residential facilities in a variety of geographical contexts. Chief among these beliefs are that access to education is a basic human right and for this right to be fully exercised for many Indigenous children in remote Australia there is a need to spend long periods living and schooling away from home. Participation in education and levels of educational attainment are key predictors of a significant range of quality of life indicators for all people. The direct correlation between levels of educational attainment and health for example, demands that the transition to boarding for Indigenous children from remote communities works as well as it possibly can. Quality research has a key role to play in ensuring that the transition does work as well as it possibly can.

During the period in which this research has taken place, I have been involved in the preparation of submissions and appeared at hearings and public consultations during the conduct of a range of inquiries relevant to the transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students, including the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Participation in each of these activities, especially the Royal Commission, has served to broaden my understanding of the wide range of factors that influence the transition and which ultimately determine whether or not it is

successful in achieving the principal aim of providing a quality and comprehensive secondary education.

1.3 The Research Setting: The Lockhart River Context

Having outlined the professional chronology which provided the motivation for the conduct of this research, it is important to provide a brief outline of some of the factors which shape the research context. While there is a long history of contact between the traditional inhabitants of the surrounding region with Europeans, the community of Lockhart River was established in 1924 when five Aboriginal clans: the KuukuYa'u, Wuthanti, Umpila, Kaanju an Uuthalganu were forcibly moved into a mission under the control of the Anglican Church. During the period of mission control, the Anglican Church assumed control of most elements of community life including education provision. This situation continued until 1967 when the Church transferred control of the mission and all its functions, including education, to the Queensland Government. Formal Queensland Government control continued until 1985 with the formation of the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council made up of locally elected councilors.

The history of Lockhart River, including the forced movement of the community site from "Old Mission' to the current location, mirrors that of many other remote Indigenous communities across Australia where a combination of control from Church and government authorities has served to disrupt connections to land, language and culture. While a number of traditional languages are still spoken in the community, Aboriginal English is predominant (Queensland Government, 2020). The impact of a history of Church and government control is expressed as follows:

Under the rules of the new mission, we were not allowed to speak our language or to practice our cultural traditions and were moved inland a little bit away from our sea country. Marked by the good intentions but often misguided policies of successive governments we have managed to kep our unique culture alive and strong. Our culture has survived in spite of the attempts to spoil it by various missionaries and government organisations (Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council).

The unbroken connections to culture in the Lockhart River context are best exemplified through art and dance. Lockhart River dancers and the artists who have made up the' Lockhart River Art Gang' are internationally renowned. The strong connections to land and culture were formally acknowledged in 2001 with the formation of the Mangkuma Land Trust and in 2009 the Australian Federal Court ruled in favour of the Kuuku Ya'u as the traditional owners of much of the land to the north of the community.

1.3.1 Current Education Provision in Lockhart River

In terms of current education service provision, Lockhart State School is a P-12 school administered by the Queensland Department of Education. It provides a primary (Prep to Year 6)

program which is built around the Australian Curriculum and, at the time this research was conducted in 2015/16, offered a modified secondary (Year 7-12) program to provide a formal educational experience for those locally residing students who were not engaged in secondary education outside the community. These students had either not been enrolled in a boarding school or residential facility or they had gone away and then, for a range of reasons, not returned to a boarding school. In 2016 there were 117 students enrolled, with the majority of these in the primary school. The 2019 enrolment was 135 students. Specific primary and secondary numbers are not available. The overall attendance rate for the school in 2016 was 72% and in 2019 it was 47%, well below the overall attendance rate in 2019 for all Queensland state P-10/P-12 schools of 88% (Lockhart River State School. Annual Report, 2019, p.8).

In terms of data relevant to Year 12 completion, Lockhart River has completion rates significantly below those for non-Indigenous Australians and for the broader Queensland Indigenous population. The 2016 Census identified that 18.9% of people in the community aged 15 years and over had completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared with 37.9% of the Queensland Indigenous population (Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, 2020, p. 16). Given the nature of the secondary education provided in the community, Year 12 completion is currently only possible through attendance at a boarding school or residential facility.

1.4 The Policy Environment Influencing This Study

There is no stated policy, at either State or Commonwealth level, that demands that children from Lockhart River must leave their community to attend boarding schools or residential facilities but it has long been the expectation of the community and the Queensland Education Department that nearly all children will transition to boarding schools and residential facilities in urban and regional centres throughout Queensland when they complete Year 6.

In short, the majority of students from Lockhart River go away to boarding schools and residential facilities at the end of their primary education because the Queensland Government does not provide a comprehensive secondary education service to the community. In many remote Indigenous communities throughout Queensland and throughout remote regions in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory, the transition to boarding has become an accepted practice, driven in large part by education policy that limits secondary education provision. In Queensland, the years of compulsory schooling are clearly mandated and a child is considered to be of compulsory school age from 6 years and 6 months until they turn 16, or they complete Year 10 (whichever comes first). Parents of compulsory-school-aged children must enroll them at a school and ensure they attend school on every school day, unless the parent has a reasonable excuse.

In a number of remote Indigenous communities in Queensland there is no state education provision beyond Year 6. In other remote communities such as Pormpuraaw and Coen on Cape York,

parents must ensure their children of secondary school age are enrolled in a boarding facility in order that they are compliant with Queensland law. The same situation exists in the outer island communities of the Torres Strait where the only secondary school is located on Thursday Island. While Lockhart River may be classified as a P-12 school, the range and nature of secondary school subjects makes boarding the only viable option for the majority of parents and guardians.

Given the importance given to the place of boarding as a proposed solution to the problems of remote education, in particular remote secondary education for Indigenous students in many parts of Australia, the absence of any over-arching policy at the national level or at the state or territory level is problematic. As the literature review in Chapter 2 will demonstrate, the lack of a consistent and coherent national policy that can underpin a rational approach to program and service delivery in the transition space has been highlighted by in the academic literature and in a number of important inquiries, reviews and reports. Before looking in detail at the frameworks that currently provide the structure in which the transition occurs, it is important to provide an overview of the current situation with respect to boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities nationally. Such an overview will provide the broader context in which students leave Lockhart River to participate in secondary education.

1.5 Remote Indigenous Students in Boarding

It is estimated that there are usually between 5,000 and 6,000 Indigenous students in Australian boarding schools at any time (Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia, 2020). A distribution of their placements is presented in Figure 1.2 below. The complexity and diversity that characterises the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities for Indigenous students in Australia means that there is no single or generic experience of the transition. It is therefore important at this point to provide a detailed outline of the current models of operation that exist. The students in Figure 1.2 come from a mix of remote, rural, regional and urban settings and while there are no publicly available national data sets pertaining to the distinction between remote and non-remote students, it is clear that the majority of remote students come from communities in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

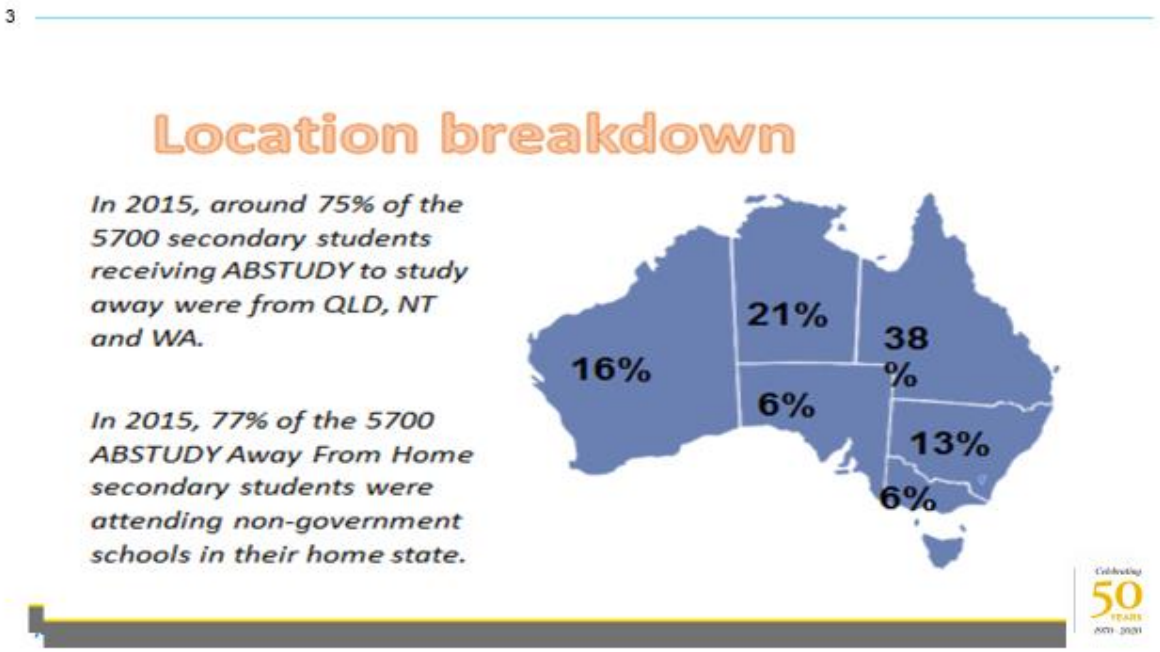

Figure 1.2: Demographics of Abstudy Placements (Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018)

1.5.1 Typology of Boarding for Indigenous Students from remote Communities

The transition to boarding schools and residential facilities for Indigenous students across Australia is characterized by diversity across State and Territory jurisdictions and within those jurisdictions. There are, for example, students from remote Indigenous communities attending prestigious non-government, Independent boarding schools in major capital cities and regional centres across Australia, well away from home, while other students will attend boarding facilities run by both government and non-government providers that are located within their own regions and much closer to students' home communities. These facilities vary considerably in terms of location, size, history, enrolment demographic, availability of resources and programs on offer. There has been a considerable expansion in the number and type of boarding support programs and facilities that cater to the education and wider support needs of remote students in recent years but there is very little in the research literature that captures this variety and diversity.

The Tiwi Islands in the Northern Territory are a case in point. There is a long-standing tradition of students from Tiwi Island communities attending prestigious non-government schools in Melbourne while at the same time, students from the same communities will board at schools in Darwin or attend Tiwi College on Melville Island. Attending as weekly boarders, they maintain very close connections with community, family and culture while they participate in a secondary boarding program. In the same way, some students from a remote Queensland community such as Aurukun on the West coast of Cape York will attend boarding schools and residential communities as close as

Weipa or Cairns while others will travel as far south as Brisbane or Toowoomba, accessing a mix of state and non-state schools.

The 2017 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs report into Indigenous Education 2017 identified a variety of different types of boarding models which include:

- Boarding schools
- Independent boarding facilities
- State owned residential colleges
- Federal Government hostels; and
- Informal arrangements. (2017, p. 97)

A further elaboration on the types of boarding models is important in this context, given the significant differences that exist across the sector. There is for example, no fair or realistic comparison to be made between Yirara College in Alice Springs or Djarragun College in Cairns, and St Joseph's College in Sydney and Marist College Ashgrove in Brisbane. Djarragun and Yirara's secondary boarding enrolments are made up exclusively of Indigenous students, the majority of whom come from remote communities. Students from remote Indigenous communities make up only a very small proportion of secondary boarding numbers at St Joseph's and Marist Ashgrove, though all four schools would be identified by the classification above as boarding schools with Indigenous enrolments.

1.5.2 The Non-government Sector: 'Prestigious' or 'Elite' Schools

A significant number of Australia's well established and best resourced non-government schools offer boarding places to students from remote Indigenous communities. Initially established under the auspices of Christian religious denominations, a significant number of these schools offer a small number of places each year to Indigenous students from remote communities, most of whom are supported through a range of scholarship programs. Students from remote Indigenous communities make up a very small proportion of the enrolments in these schools, which have very well established and long running boarding programs. Examples of these schools by state include the following:

- St Joseph's College in New South Wales
- Melbourne Grammar School in Victoria
- Rostrevor College in South Australia
- Aquinas College in Western Australia
- Brisbane Boy's College in Queensland

Schools in this category are characterized by their very high fee structures both in terms of boarding and tuition costs and the additional costs associated with participation in co-curricular programs and items such as school uniforms. In 2020, Brisbane Boy's College for example charges an

annual Year 7-12 tuition fee of $24,116, a boarding fee of $26,604 and annual technology levy of $1,200. Their entry and selection procedures are highly selective and application and enrolment fees are $2,070 alone. The scholarship programs that support Indigenous students in these schools will be discussed later in this chapter. They are an important element of the Indigenous boarding landscape and their operation has attracted a degree of significant recent research attention. While students from remote Indigenous communities enrolled in these non-government schools have received significant research (and media) attention, the majority of remote students attend boarding schools and residential facilities with very different enrolment characteristics.

1.5.3 Non-government Schools with Significant Indigenous or Indigenous Only Boarding Enrolments

A further category of non-government boarding schools is responsible for educating significant numbers of remote Indigenous students and the schools in this category differ significantly from those outlined above. The majority of schools in this category cater exclusively to Indigenous boarders or have a majority of Indigenous students. Some of the schools operate as part of a system, usually denominational, while others operate as truly independent entities. Examples of such schools are:

- Queensland: Saint Teresa's College Abergowrie, Mount St Bernard College Herberton,
- Djarragun College Cairns
- Western Australia: Clontarf Aboriginal College
- Northern Territory: Yirara College Alice Springs, St John's College Darwin.

By comparison with schools classified as elite or prestigious, schools in this category are low fee paying and rely almost exclusively on government funding to meet operating costs. The Australian Government Abstudy scheme, which will be discussed shortly, is the single most significant source of funding for schools of this nature. At Yirara College in Alice Springs for example, which is Australia's largest all-Indigenous boarding school, "Families do not pay school fees. The estimated $60,000 cost per student is met through a complex federal and Territory funding model. Any Indigenous student who wants to attend is accepted, but there are no day students" (Owen, 2018). As the literature review and analysis of research findings will reveal, the operation of schools in this category can be highly problematic. The closure of Shalom College in Townsville in late 2017, a school with an enrolment demographic similar to that of Yirara, highlighted the significant financial and operational difficulties often experienced by schools that cater almost exclusively to the educational and associated support and well-being needs of remote secondary students.

A further distinction in this category of schools with exclusively Indigenous boarding students includes number of smaller facilities, some of which cater exclusively for remote students, while others enroll Indigenous students from urban, rural and remote areas. Examples of such schools are:

- Tiwi College on Melville Island in the Northern Territory
- Worrawa College in Victoria
- Christian Aboriginal Parent controlled Schools (CAPS) in Coolgardie and Esperance in Western Australia

Schools in this category also rely almost exclusively on government revenue as their primary source of income and in the case of Tiwi College, operate as weekly boarding facilities with their students spending weekends at home in their communities.

1.5.4 Stand-alone Providers

One of the key developments in the Indigenous boarding space in recent years has been the development of a small number of residential providers that exist independently of any single school. These residential facilities, some aligned with sporting codes, partner with a range of government and non-government schools and focus on the provision of residential services and education support. The first of these facilities, AFL (Australian Football League) Cape York House Cairns, opened in 2013 and caters almost exclusively for boys from remote Indigenous communities in Cape York, the Torres Strait and Gulf region in North Queensland, with a small number of students coming from communities in the Northern territory. There are now four facilities of this type in Queensland. Two, one for boys and one for girls, are run by the AFL (Australian Football League) in Cairns and two in Townsville are run under the auspices of the Townsville Cowboys NRL (National Rugby League) team. Each of the four facilities houses approximately 50 students who attend a range of government and non-government schools as day students.

Another example of the stand-alone model is the Melbourne Indigenous Transition School (MITS) which opened in 2016 with 22 students, the majority of whom came from remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Working in partnership with eight non-government schools, the intention is to give students a stable first year away from home in Year 7 before students transition into home stay arrangements and attend a range of non-government schools as day students. The model has now been extended to allow students to remain under the care of the Melbourne Indigenous Transition School for a further year.

The Kaziew Meta boarding facility on Thursday provides another example of the stand-alone facility. Operated by an independent board, Kaziew Meta caters exclusively for students from the outer island communities of the Torres Strait in Far North Queensland who all attend Tagai College, the state-run high school on Thursday Island.

1.5.5 Government-run Boarding Providers

There are a number of Australian and State and Territory government entities that cater to the residential needs of Indigenous students. Aboriginal Hostels Limited (AHL), an Australian

government agency, operates a number of secondary hotels that provide residential care to students who attend a variety of local schools. Those that cater specifically to the needs of remote Indigenous students are located in Wadeye and Kathrine in the Northern Territory, Kununurra in Western Australia and on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait in Queensland.

The Queensland Education Department operates three boarding facilities that enrol students from remote Indigenous communities, located in Weipa, Mount Isa and Dalby, while the Northern Territory Education Department operates the Dawurr boarding facility for students from remote Arnhem Land communities in Nhulunbuy. In Adelaide, the Wiltja residential facility serves secondary students from the remote Aboriginal communities of South Australia, all of whom attend Woodville High School. The largest government run provider of residential services in Australia is the Country Hostels Authority in Western Australia. The authority provides residential support to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and operates facilities throughout much of Western Australia. The facility catering to the largest number of students from remote Indigenous communities is located in Broome in the far north of the state.

1.5.6 Other Arrangements

The diversity of the Indigenous boarding landscape is further exemplified through the operation of a number of other smaller programs such as that run by the Wunan Foundation in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. The foundation offers boarding school scholarships to students from this remote region who attend either Pacific Hills Christina College in Sydney or Mercy College or Parade College in Melbourne. What is unique in this arrangement are the small numbers of students in the program, 22 in total, the partnership arrangement between the foundation, students' families and the schools and the role of the House Parents who look after the students. The program's approach is "built on the knowledge that Aboriginal students do better while they are away at school if they feel connected to home and culture. To achieve this we offer a home-like setting for the students who live together in a house under the supervision and care of Aboriginal House Parents from the East Kimberley" (Wunan Foundation, 2016, as cited in Gillan et al. 2017, p. 65).

There are a number of other examples of providers attempting to move away from the more traditional, structured and institutionalized models of boarding and three in particular demonstrate the variety and diversity of the remote Indigenous boarding space:

- The partnership between Unity College in Murray Bridge, South Australia and the remote Indigenous community of Areyonga in the Northern Territory highlights the operation of a small-scale boarding program built around the development of strong relationships and the engagement of providers with students' home communities. The program is the subject of research undertaken by Lloyd (2019).

- Wesley College in Melbourne has developed a partnership with the remote Bunuba community in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia to deliver secondary programs to Indigenous students on country and in Melbourne. The Yiramaly program promotes senior secondary retention and completion rates far beyond the national average for remote Indigenous students (Wesley College, 2020).
- Mararra Christian College in Darwin has long operated a boarding program for students from remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Residential care is provided through the operation of ten 'family homes' built around the development of strong relationships between House Parents and students who come from over 30 remote communities (Marrara Christian School, 2020).

The diversity within the Indigenous boarding sector in terms of widening opportunities for students from remote communities is a comparatively recent phenomenon and contrasts sharply with the view often portrayed in the Australian media that all students attend elite non-government boarding schools on scholarship schemes. The Australian Newspaper for example, gives significant prominence in terms of reporting to Indigenous students engaged in the scholarship program run by the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), the majority of whom are from urban or regional centres. The reality is that very few students from remote Indigenous communities attend schools in this category, with the majority of remote students pursuing a secondary education in boarding facilities where Indigenous students comprise a significant proportion of the student population.

1.5.7 Where Lockhart River Children Attend Boarding Schools and Residential Facilities

In Queensland, students from remote communities in Cape York, the Torres Strait, the Gulf of Carpentaria, Palm Island and a range of other remote locations make the journey to locations as diverse as Thursday Island, Weipa, Mount Isa, Cairns and the Atherton Tablelands, Townsville region, Charters Towers, Toowoomba, Brisbane, Rockhampton and Yeppoon in pursuit of a quality, comprehensive secondary education.

Students from Lockhart River attend boarding school and residential facilities throughout Queensland. In terms of their geographic spread, students can be placed as far apart as Weipa on the Western side of Cape York through to Toowoomba in the Darling Downs region of South East Queensland. In terms of the 2015 cohort of Year 6 students leaving the community to go away to board in 2016 the destinations were as follows:

- Western Cape College (Residential Campus) Weipa. A P-12 school administered by the Queensland Education Department with a 120 bed residential facility attended by Indigenous students from the Torres Strait and Cape York communities.

- Djarragun College Cairns. An Independent P-12 school administered by Cape York Partnerships with secondary co-educational boarding. All boarders are from remote Indigenous communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory
- AFL Cape York House Cairns. A stand-alone residential facility in Cairns for secondary school aged boys from remote Indigenous communities in Queensland. Students live at AFL House and attend one of six Independent, Catholic or Queensland Education Department secondary schools in Cairns.
- Saint Patrick's College Townsville. A Catholic girls' secondary school with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous boarders
- St Brendan's College Yeppoon. A Catholic boys' secondary school near Rockhampton with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous boarders
- St Saviour's Catholic College Toowoomba. A Catholic girls secondary school with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous boarders
- Downlands Catholic College Toowoomba. A Catholic co-educational school with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous boarders

At the time this research was conducted, older Lockhart River students were also attending some of the schools listed above, with others at St Joseph's College at Nudgee in Brisbane and Saint Teresa's Catholic College in Ingham near Townsville. Both schools are Catholic boarding colleges with St Teresa's catering solely for Indigenous boarders while St Joseph's has a small number of Indigenous boarders and a majority of non-Indigenous boarders. The majority of Lockhart River students who left the community to attend secondary school at the start of 2016 were enrolled in the non-government school sector.

1.6 Australian Government Support for Boarding

Having outlined the Indigenous boarding context nationally, it is important to examine the interventions made by government at state, territory and national level that enable the transition to occur. It is clear that while education service delivery in remote Indigenous communities is primarily the responsibility of state and territory governments, the majority of remote Indigenous boarders are educated in schools and residential facilities run by the non-government school sector. Non-government schools receive the bulk of their funding from the Commonwealth and from the contributions made by parents and guardians through the payment of school fees and levies. The Australian Government has historically been the majority public funder, reflecting a long standing bi-partisan commitment to supporting parental choice and diversity in the schooling system. State and territory governments are the minority public funder of schools in the non-government sector.

The great diversity that exists in the non-government sector as reflected in the vastly different nature of schools such as Yirara in Alice Springs and St Joseph's College in Sydney is recognized in

Australian Government funding through the application of the Schooling Resourcing Standard (SRS) under which "majority Indigenous schools and remote 'sole provider' schools are exempt from the 'capacity to contribute' requirement and are entitled to the full base amount of funding per student. Every Indigenous child in every school also attracts a loading. The loading starts at 20 per cent of the student amount for the first Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student in a school, increasing up to 120 per cent for schools with 100 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students" (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2020). In terms of the funding that supports the education of boarding students from remote Indigenous communities, the Australian Government is the dominant provider. The funding support in terms of recurrent funding is however, not the only means by which the Australian Government facilitates the transition to boarding and a number of other interventions, programs or strategies are of critical importance here.

1.6.1 Abstudy

Abstudy is an Australian Government payment made to schools and or the families of boarding students which aims to:

> Address the particular disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by improving educational outcomes to a level equivalent to the Australian population in general. Abstudy policy aims to encourage Indigenous students and apprentices to take full advantage of available educational opportunities and improve their employment opportunities. Means tested benefits available as part of the Abstudy scheme are targeted to those most in need. (Australian Government, 2018, p. 6)

The importance of Abstudy in terms of financial support for the transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students cannot be overstated. In the context of this research, every student leaving Lockhart River is supported through access to the payments which cover a significant proportion of the boarding and tuition costs of attending a boarding school or residential facility. The payments, which in most cases are made direct to schools, amount to $27,000 per year per student and are made in addition to other sources of funding schools receive for their Indigenous students. Abstudy also covers the costs associated with student travel to and from community at the beginning and end of each school term and also provides for a minimum of two return trips per year for events of cultural significance, especially for funerals. The role and function of Abstudy in terms of the essential support it provides for all Indigenous students, especially remote students in the transition to boarding, has been the subject of a number of key government and independent reviews and inquiries in recent years. While an education specific payment, it is classified as a welfare payment with policy functions managed by the Australian Government Department of Social Services and administration managed by Services Australia through the operations of Centrelink. As the literature review will demonstrate, there is a growing support for it to be removed from its orientation as a welfare or income support

payment and be aligned closely with a range of other education-specific supports aimed at addressing Indigenous disadvantage in education.

The number of Indigenous secondary students in receipt of Abstudy support for the period 2013-14 to 2017-18 and the current and estimated Australian Government expenditure on Abstudy for secondary students is presented in Figure 1.3 (a) and 3 (b) below. The information does not disaggregate between remote/non remote students.

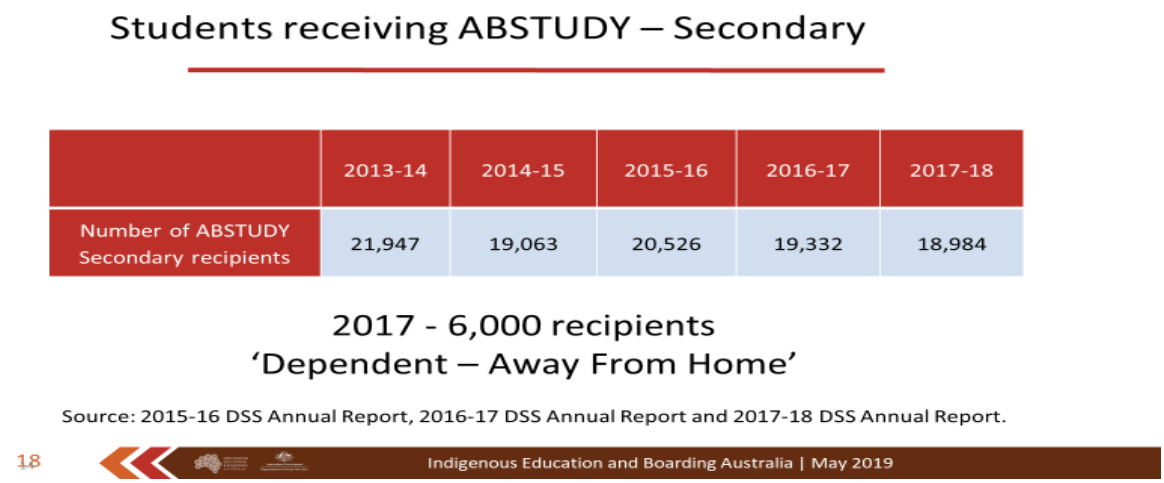

Figure 1.3 (a): Secondary Indigenous Students in Receipt of Abstudy Funding

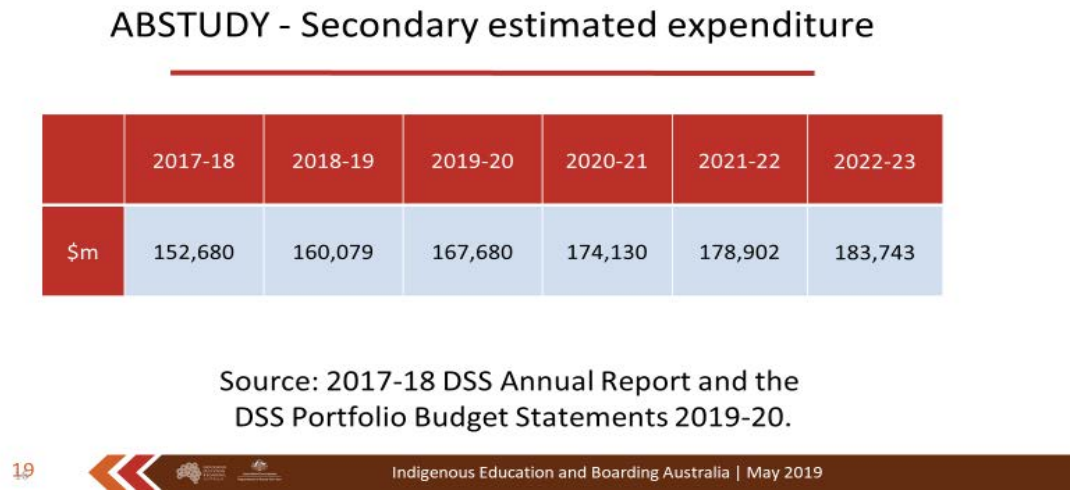

Figure 1.3 (b): Australian Government Expenditure on Abstudy Secondary Support (Australian Government Department of Social Services and Indigenous Education and Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia, 2020).

1.6.2 Scholarship Programs

The provision of scholarships to support Indigenous students to attend boarding schools and residential facilities is also an important part of Australian Government policy in the transition space. Under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), a range of scholarship providers are funded to provide over 2,500 scholarships to Indigenous students to attend a range of boarding schools across Australia. The scholarship application process is, in most instances, highly competitive and while no publicly data is available it is clear that a significant proportion of scholarships are provided to Indigenous students from urban, regional and rural areas with remote or very remote community recipients making up 30.4% of the total (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017, p. vi). None of the students who left Lockhart River at the start of 2016 were supported by scholarship programs.

It is important to note here that the funding provided by the scholarships does not cover all the costs associated with attending a boarding school. In most cases the scholarship will cover the cost differential between what Abstudy will pay and the costs charged by the school with parents also required to make a contribution. In 2019-2020, the cost of scholarship programs was estimated at $26 million, with the most significant providers being the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), Cape York Partnerships, Yalari Foundation and Townsville Catholic Education.

As with Abstudy, the operation of Commonwealth support for scholarship programs has attracted significant research attention which will be examined in Chapter 2.

1.7 The Research Questions

Having outlined the background to the transition to boarding for Lockhart River students and for students from remote Indigenous communities across Australia and articulated the personal and professional experiences that provided the motivation for wanting to describe in detail the experience of the transition, it is appropriate to state the questions that guided the conduct of the research.

The central research question that will be addressed through this research is:

How is the transition experience from home community to boarding school experienced by those involved: the students, their parents and guardians and community members?

From this central question there were a number of guiding questions which shaped how this research attempted to capture the totality of the transition experience of children from Lockhart River community to boarding school. These questions are:

Sub-research question 1:

How do those that are about to experience the transition view the prospects of going to school away from Lockhart River?

Sub-research question 2:

What is the lived experience of those that experience the transition to boarding school?

Sub-research question 3:

What do the children themselves, their parents and care-givers and community members believe are the factors which make for successful transition?

These questions define the intent of the research in 'unpacking' the experience of transition to boarding for students, their parents and guardians and community members and in articulating the factors that allow or enable children to remain in secondary school away from their home community. However, as this research process unfolded over a number of years it became clear that this engagement with community and engagement with the broader transition agenda would bring to light a number of factors outside of, but related to the experience of, the transition for children from Lockhart River. These contextual features could not be ignored in terms of the wider scope of the transition to boarding for Indigenous students from remote communities across Australia. In my conversations with children and families during the conduct of the research, through an exposure to the wider literature around boarding for Indigenous children, through contributions to the literature, through my professional experience, and through active participation in a number of key events that have shaped a growing conversation around Indigenous boarding, in particular the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, it became clear that the context in which the transition to boarding occurs was highly problematic. A lack of policy clarity and a subsequent lack of clear accountability on the part of all key stakeholders in the transition space presented a real threat to the education and concomitant life chances of many of Australia's most vulnerable children: the children from remote Indigenous communities who must leave home in order to access a quality and comprehensive secondary education.

It is therefore important to state that a fourth sub question emerged from the specific context of the research in Lockhart River and from my engagement in the broader transition space:

Sub research question 4: What is the context in which the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities takes place and how does this context serve to shape the experience of the transition?

1.8 Summary and Thesis Structure

In this chapter I have attempted to do two things: first, I have described my personal journey which has provided the motivation for engaging in this research. I have also acknowledged the socially constructed lens I bring to this research and the need for me, similar to most non-Indigenous Australians, to gain a perspective of this experience from the individuals that experience it. I have presented the formative elements of my experience in a variety of roles: teacher, school leader,

community administrator, public servant, leader of boarding facilities catering for children from remote Indigenous communities and manager of a program that supports children in transition and their families. I have explained how these have contributed to the development of a view that the transition from remote community to boarding appears to be highly problematic for key stakeholders in remote Indigenous communities. The experiences of children, parents and guardians and community members of the transition to boarding therefore warrant closer investigation through the conduct of research which privileges the voices of those directly involved.

Second, I have articulated the context in which the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities occurs for students from remote Indigenous communities such as Lockhart River. I have provided a boarding school and residential facility typology with the intent of dismissing the notion that there is a typical experience of boarding. It is clear that the boarding space is characterized by diversity and complexity and these serve to shape the transition environment.

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature pertinent to the transition of Indigenous children from remote communities to boarding school. This review will highlight the fact that in the last decade there has been a significant growth in research which has focused on this area and which has presented the experience of the transition through the eyes of the key players: the students themselves, their parents and care-givers and the staff of the schools which they attend. The review articulates the main themes which have emerged from the research literature and a number of key reports, reviews and inquiries conducted by or on behalf of governments at different levels into the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities. The chapter also seeks to identify the gaps in the research literature; thus, providing the focus for the study. It also explores methodological approaches in these studies and provides an informed base for the methodology and methods employed.

Chapter Three provides the theoretical and methodological framework for the research and articulates the justification for the methods chosen for the conduct of the research. The methods used to give voice to those that have experienced, are about to experience and are experiencing the transition: students, their parents and guardians and a number of community members are described in detail with particular emphasis on articulating the importance of the research setting. The chapter will explain in detail the steps taken to ensure that the research was conducted in accordance with the required ethical and cultural protocols and outline how the conduct of the research was consistent with best practice in the conduct of qualitative research in the context of a remote Indigenous community.

Chapters Four and Five present the research findings and provide a detailed thematic coverage of the data collected from the interviews with participants. They reveals the complexity of the transition for all involved and reveal the human face of this experience. Chapter Four examines the experiences of children and adults in the period prior to, during and after the first year of transition,

while Chapter Five provides for an articulation of the factors adults and children believe make for a successful experience of the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities.

Chapter Six presents a description and analysis of the key themes that emerged from the data presented in the preceding two chapters. It then discusses these key themes in the context of how the transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students has become an area of intense research interest and the focus of a range of important State, Territory and Commonwealth government reports, reviews and inquiries discussed in depth in the literature review.

Chapter Seven has two key purposes. It first provides an articulation of the key the areas in which further research into the transition, identified through the conduct of this research and through the literature review, must be undertaken in the near future. Key among these is the need for extensive quantitative research to complement the growing body of qualitative research. It then details a number of recommendations regarding future policy in the space that have emerged from this research and the wider research literature and from experience of working in the space in a variety of roles and through my active engagement in the conduct of reviews, report, inquiries and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Chapter Eight concludes the dissertation with a reflection on the complex and contested nature of the transition to boarding space and reference to the significant impact of COVID 19 on boarding students from remote Indigenous communities in both the immediate short-term and potentially into the future.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

2.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the key themes that have emerged from the growing body of research literature relevant to the transition of students from remote Indigenous communities to boarding schools and residential facilities including key reports and inquiries. It begins by providing an overview and synthesis of the literature relevant to the key concepts of 'remote' and 'transition' and follows by outlining the historical context that continues to inform and influence the space in which students from remote Indigenous communities leave their homes in order to access a quality and comprehensive secondary education. It also examines, from a research literature perspective, what methodologies and methods have previously been used in research conducted in the transition literature and what is the necessary and opportune research to be conducted in this space. This information is then used in Chapter Three to describe the research focus and approach.

When work on this research began in 2013 it will be shown in this chapter that one of the dominant themes in the available literature was the lack of any substantial body of personalised research into an area of Indigenous education, both nationally and internationally, that has played a significant role in providing an opportunity for children from remote communities to participate in a quality and comprehensive secondary education. This personalised perspective gap in this research was articulated by Mander, who stated that:

> Despite the breadth and depth of debate as well as decades of State and Federal awareness to the needs of Aboriginal families in regional and remote communities, little research has exclusively explored the experience for Aboriginal children studying away from home at boarding school. (Mander, 2012, p. 9)

In the period 2012 to 2020, there has been a significant increase in the amount of research being conducted into the transition of Australian Indigenous children from remote communities to boarding schools and residential facilities (Benveniste, 2018; O'Bryan, 2016). The transition space has also attracted significant interest from the Australian Government and the Northern Territory Government as demonstrated through the commissioning of a range of reports and inquiries (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018; Lloyd, 2019). Indeed, in 2013 when work on this research project began, there existed only one example of doctoral research; that done by David Mander in the West Australian context, with an exclusive focus on the transition of Indigenous children into boarding schools. That situation has changed markedly and:

> There are now more than 40 peer reviewed articles or theses that address the issues faced by remote First Nations students attending boarding schools. There have also been numerous reviews (Commonwealth of Australia and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017; KPMG, 2016), inquiries (Crawford and Schwab, 2017; Halsey, 2018; House of

> Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017; Queensland Productivity Commission, 2017); and a Royal Commission (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) that have dealt directly or indirectly with boarding schools or facilities and scholarship programs in Australia (Guenther et al., 2018, p. 2.)

2.1 The Literature and Remoteness

Before moving to an exposition of the key themes that have emerged from both the research literature and a range of reports, inquiries, reviews and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse it is important to bring clarity to the concepts of "remote' and 'transition,' both of which serve to shape the focus and conduct of this research.

Any analysis of the key themes that emerge from an examination of the literature dealing with Indigenous students transitioning from remote Indigenous communities into boarding school must in the first instance state clearly what is meant by the terms 'remote' and 'very remote' as they are often terms often used without any clear definition. In the modern Australian context, 'remote areas' are defined in the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) developed by the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics). The remoteness of a particular community or location is determined using the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). The ABS generates an average ARIA score for each community or location based on its distance from population centres of various sizes. Remoteness areas comprise six categories as follows:

1. Major cities of Australia
2. Inner regional Australia
3. Outer regional Australia
4. Remote Australia
5. Very remote Australia
6. Migratory regions (comprising offshore, shipping and migratory places). (Australian Government, 2011)

An articulation of the definitions and their application is important in this context. Lockhart River is classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as 'Very Remote.' There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that while considerable progress is being made in improving education outcomes for Indigenous Australians across the board, serious issues continue to exist for students in and from communities classified as remote or very remote. The *Closing the Gap Report* released annually by the Australian Government reflects current research in stating clearly and unambiguously that across a range of indicators, a much larger gap exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in remote and very remote areas than in metropolitan areas (Australian Government, 2020). Stewart and Abbott-Chapman (2011) provide a concise summary of the situation in terms of the impact played by remoteness in the perpetuation of disadvantage in arguing that:

> in rurally remote Australia students who suffer the twin disadvantages of rurality, especially rural isolation, and low socio-economic status have been shown by research to be most under-represented in post-compulsory education, to a degree which has changed little over the last fifteen years (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008; Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) students in rural and remote areas of Australia suffer the greatest inequalities in educational outcomes (p. 2).

This is a view reinforced by Ockendon (2014) who states that "the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students widens as remoteness increases" (p. 1). The degree of remoteness also exerts a powerful influence on the health of Indigenous Australians and "numerous studies have demonstrated that Australians living in remote and very remote areas have, on average, higher rates of risky behaviours such as smoking, poorer access to health services, and worse health than people living in regional or metropolitan areas" (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014, p. 1).

In some remote and very remote communities the levels of educational and wider societal disadvantage as measured by a range of indicators are potentially masked when data are used which pertains to the Indigenous population generally. For example, while the proportion of Indigenous Australians who have completed Year 12 rose from 19.4% in 2001 to 25.4% in 2011 the situation in Wadeye, a remote indigenous community in the Northern Territory, is such that the community is "more at risk of prolonged dependency due to almost wholesale disengagement from schooling" (Taylor, 2010, p. 6).

Indeed, there is a pressing need in the current discourse which centres on Indigenous education to distinguish in clear and unambiguous terms between data which pertains to Indigenous students in and from remote and very remote schools and data which pertains to Indigenous students in and from major cities and inner and outer regional locations. It is clear that the greatest disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is a reflection of location and the "broad policy implications of geographic distribution of Indigenous education are reasonably straightforward. The lowest rates of educational completion tend to be in remote areas, and these are where the need would appear to be greatest" (Biddle, 2011, p. 7).

Rothwell (2013) writes of the need to develop and implement Indigenous policy that must make clear distinctions between urban and remote populations. He writes of the need to challenge "the chief fantasy that shapes national policy on Indigenous affairs: the notion that all Australians who identify as Aboriginal belong to a single community of interest and should be included in the same measures of progress and wellbeing; that Aboriginal can be seen as an undivided whole."

Rothwell's point is well articulated with reference to the current Queensland context and rates of Year 12 completion. The gap in Year 12 completion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous

students has, according to data released by the Queensland Department of Education, effectively been closed:

> Queensland's Indigenous students are completing Year 12 at almost the same rate as other seniors in the state in what has been described as a 'miraculous' achievement. A budget estimates hearing has been told 97.2 per cent of Indigenous students received a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) or a Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA) in 2017, compared to 98.1 per cent of non-Indigenous students. That is up from75 per cent in 2017 (ABC News, 2018).

While Year 12 completion data for remote students in Queensland is not tracked separately from that of the Indigenous student population generally, anecdotal observations strongly suggest that a Queensland-wide completion rate of 97% would not be replicated in any of the state's remote or very remote communities. It is clear that the relatively small numbers of remote Indigenous students are 'hidden' in the broader statistical picture. While the limited available data suggests that there has been some improvement in terms of outcomes for remote Indigenous students, it is my experience that a student from a remote community such as Lockhart River is more likely to disengage from secondary education before they complete Year 10 than they are to complete Year 12. Three Lockhart River students, all girls, completed Year 12 in 2019. In 2012, just prior to the formal commencement of this research, no student completed Year 12.

Remoteness, which is tied to the extent of local secondary education provision, does exert a powerful influence on educational outcomes. In analysing data from the 2016 Steering Committee for the Review of Government service provision, Guenther and Fogarty (2018) state that "the most recent data on Year 12 completions for remote First Nations students shows that only one in five young people in very remote parts of the Northern Territory (compared with more than three in five from non-remote areas of Australia) have completed Year 12 or its equivalent" (p. 3). Highlighting even more starkly the educational disadvantage that accrues from remoteness, recent research conducted by Lloyd in the Northern Territory compared remote data from that jurisdiction with data from the 2016 United Nations Global Education Monitoring Report and concluded that "some Indigenous people living in the remotest parts of the Northern Territory have some of the lowest completion rates in Australia, comparable to some of the lowest in the world" (Lloyd, 2019, p. 17). The Australian Government 2020 Closing the Gap Report reinforced again the impact of remoteness on a range of indicators in stating simply that while there have been improvements across all jurisdictions in rates of Indigenous Year 12 attainment in the last decade, "The proportion of Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 years attaining Year 12 or equivalent decreases with remoteness. The Year 12 attainment rate is 85 per cent in Major Cities compared with 38 per cent in Very Remote areas" (2020, p. 60).

In the context of this research, the impact of remoteness on the experience of transition and the educational outcomes that derive from that transition cannot be overstated and "the lumping together of 'Indigenous' students in the same basket makes it sound like the issue is relatively simple and that the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are all the same regardless of location" (Benveniste et al. 2014, p. 11). The reality is that the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, especially those transitioning to boarding schools and residential facilities, relate directly to their home location in terms of remoteness.

2.2 The Literature and Transition

The literature on the transition of children from primary to secondary school is vast and encompasses a range of research disciplines. For the purposes of this literature review it is important to focus on the literature which is specific to the transition of children from remote Indigenous communities to boarding schools and residential facilities. However, it is also important to provide an outline of the key themes around transition more broadly, especially those that have centred on the transition experience from primary to secondary school.

In order to understand the totality of the transition experience for the children from remote Indigenous communities such as Lockhart River it is important to state clearly what we mean by the term transition. Green (1997) states succinctly that "transition is a process of moving from the known to the unknown and transition from primary school to high school can be described in this way" (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009, p. 67). In articulating the challenges that come with moving from the known to the unknown, Griebel and Niesel (2005) state that:

> Transitions have been identified as phases of life changes connected with developmental demands that require intensified and accelerated learning and that are socially regulated. They are also characterized as phases of heightened vulnerability. In a child's life, transitions can be the birth of a sibling, parental separation, puberty, and, last not least, transitions into educational institutions. (p. 6)

The developmental demands that accompany transitions are intensified in adolescence, where biological, cognitive and social-emotional changes including changing relationships with parents and peers occur simultaneously with the move from primary to secondary or middle school (Roeser et al., 2000). The capacity of individuals to negotiate successfully the demands of transitions in adolescence is closely tied to concepts of resilience and the acquisition and practice of appropriate coping strategies. Where young people are able to manage transitions appropriately and successfully, their competencies are strengthened and subsequent transitions will be less problematic, whereas "problems with coping and maladjustment raise the probability that subsequent transitions will not be coped with adequately" (Niesel & Griebel, 2005, p. 7).

Firth et al. (2009) state that transitions, particularly in adolescence, are dynamic and ongoing and that transition is a theoretically complex field of study that has largely been studied through the lens of the bio-ecological model of child development articulated by Urie Bronfonbrenner. They argue that the bio-ecological approach provides an appropriately comprehensive framework for exploring the complexity of the transition process through its focus on interaction, interrelatedness and human agency. The view that geographical transitions in early adolescence, wherein young adolescents move from essentially rural or remote areas into urban areas, are accompanied by feelings of anxiety, homesickness and increased stress, is a common theme in the Australian literature (Bramston & Patrick, 2004; Brown, 2000; Stewart & Abbott-Chapman, 2011).

In the broader transition context, limited research has been conducted into the transition made by adolescents who leave rural centres to continue their secondary studies in urban centres. In assessing the transition experience for non-Indigenous adolescents in South East Queensland, Patrick, Bramston and Wakefield (2007) found that about one-quarter of students did not appear well prepared for "the rigors of rural/urban adjustment" (p. 228). Downs (2001) compared the transition experience in terms of the experience of the move from primary to secondary school for boarding and day students at a school in Far North Queensland and found that while some aspects of the transition could be expected to be stressful, "the majority of the young adolescents generally perceived the experience of the transition to secondary school positively, with emphasis on social interaction" (p. 343).

While all young people are confronted with the challenges posed by key transitions, there is considerable evidence to support the view that the transition from primary to secondary school does present significant issues for many Indigenous children. (Beresford & Gray, 2008; MCCEETYA, 2001; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004; Penman, 2006; Smith, 2002) Of particular relevance to the transition from remote Indigenous community, Purdie et al. (2010) state that:

> The transition from primary to secondary school can be particularly stressful for Indigenous youth, particularly those who are forced to leave their community to continue their formal education. Cultural, social and language differences, being inadequately prepared, being away from familiar support and feeling shame at not having higher achievement levels may lead to anxiety and school leaving. (p. 108)

In researching the experience of Solomon Islands students transitioning from remote primary schools to large secondary boarding schools in major urban and regional centres, Vasethe (2010) outlines the staged view of transition outlined by Cotterel that identifies three distinct phases in the transition to boarding. The phases have particular relevance to this study, given the structure of this research process which will be examined in detail in Chapter Three. The phases are outlined as follows:

1. The anticipatory or coping phase in which students generate expectations about the secondary school they are about to enter
2. The initial reaction of students as they enter and slowly adjust to their new boarding school environment
3. The consolidation phase during which students begin to adjust to their new school environment and begin to identify themselves as members of their new school community rather than as newcomers.

In this context it is important to state that the transition from remote Indigenous community to boarding school must be viewed as a complex process with a number of distinct elements. Cahill et al. (2017), writing in reference to students in the Northern Territory, states that:

> Many students living in remote locations face transitions to boarding schools as they finish primary schooling. Attending boarding school requires young people to encounter multiple transitions as they move to and from home and school environments across the school year. Those schools which provide for boarders require augmented transition strategies so as to effectively support these multiple, more complex and continuing transitions (p. 5).

In unpacking the complexity of the transition for students from communities such as Lockhart River, it is important to outline a number of these multiple elements of transition. Chief among these are:

- the transition from a remote Indigenous community with a generally small population (under 1,000) to a larger urban centre often with a school population of over 1,000 students
- the transition from an environment where an Indigenous world view dominates into an environment where a non-Indigenous world view is the norm
- the transition from a non-English speaking environment into an English speaking environment
- the transition from primary to secondary school, often from a small community primary school to a very big secondary school
- the transition from a family-centred environment to a school/boarding environment
- the transition from childhood to adolescence

For any child, the transition to boarding is complex and potentially problematic. For Indigenous children from remote communities, it is particularly complex. The need to provide appropriate structured support to students from remote Indigenous communities is an important theme in the research literature that has emerged from work undertaken in Queensland through funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) into the well-being and resilience of children from remote communities in Cape York and from Palm Island in transition. (Heyres et al., 2017; McCalman et al., 2017; Redman-McLaren et al., 2017).

In assessing the health, well-being and resilience of children from remote Indigenous communities Cape York and from Palm Island in Queensland who had transitioned to boarding schools and residential facilities, Redman-McLaren et al. (2017) also surveyed students in order to assess the impact of the work done by staff from The Queensland Department of Education's Transition Support Service (TSS) staff. While the research revealed high levels of student satisfaction with the work of TSS, the authors concluded that this satisfaction did not necessarily equate to the effectiveness or efficiency of the service. It did, however, point to the potential of the Queensland model as providing a precedent for transition services for remote and very remote-dwelling Indigenous boarding students across Australia in stating that " there is a need to establish or expand transition services, especially in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and other remote regions of Queensland, that have higher proportions of Indigenous students" (2019, p. 9).

It is important to note that one of the key recommendations of the Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory (Wilson Review) regarding the desirability of transitioning remote secondary students to boarding schools led directly to the creation of the Northern Territory Transition Support Unit (TSU). Funded directly by the Commonwealth the TSU provides support to Northern Territory students who attend boarding facilities both in the NT and in every Australian state with the exception of Tasmania.

The importance of structured support for all students in transition, similar to that provided to students from a number of remote Queensland communities by the Transition Support Service and in the Northern Territory by the Transition Support Unit (TSU), was highlighted in the 2017 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Final Report, the 2019 Grant Thornton Report, the 2017 Study Away Review, and the 2017 Independent Schools Council of Australia Commissioned Report, which stated its final list of recommendations that the Commonwealth should provide funding for transition support programs in all states and territories. The evidence base underpinning the need for structured support for students from all remote locations lay in their conduct of interviews with schools and families which indicated that, "these services provide a point of connection, liaison between remote communities and secondary boarding schools. A nationwide network of transition services would be invaluable; it would be sensible for the Commonwealth to fund such services in each state and territory" (p.31).

The view expressed by the Independent Schools Council that a network of transition services be funded by the Commonwealth is derived in large part from the fact that the single biggest investment in resourcing the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities is the Commonwealth-funded Abstudy scheme, the nature and purposes of which were outlined in Chapter One.

2.3 The Growth in Research Interest

As identified in the introductory section of this chapter, the increased interest in the transition to boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities in the period 2013 to the present is of itself a phenomenon of interest to all researchers and practitioners who work in the field of Indigenous education. Prior to the conduct of Mander's (2012) research, the transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students had largely been ignored in the research literature. The table below demonstrates the focus as exemplified through recent PhD and MEd research and the conduct of reviews and inquiries.

Table 2.1

Doctoral and Masters Research Engaging with the Transition to Boarding

PhD Author	Title	Focus
David Mander (2012)	The Transition to Boarding School for Male Aboriginal Secondary Students from Regional and Remote Communities across Western Australia	Male students (Years 7-12) attending elite non-government boarding schools in Perth
Michael McCarthy (2013)	An exploration of parental choice by rural and remote parents	Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents of children attending a non-government boarding school in North Queensland
Erin Hunter (2015)	One foot in both worlds: Providing a city education for Indigenous Australian children from a very remote community: A case study. (EdD)	Secondary students from a very remote Central Australian community participating in home stay/supported accommodation attending schools in Sydney.
Jessa Rogers (2016)	Boarding School Business: The Voices of Aboriginal Girls Attending Boarding Schools	Girls attending two non-government boarding schools in Australia and one in Aoteroa New Zealand. (Urban and regional students)
Marnie O'Bryan (2016)	Shaping Future, Shaping Lives: An investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students in Australian boarding schools	Alumni of elite non-government boarding schools in Melbourne who had attended on scholarship programs. (Urban, regional and remote students)
Tessa Benveniste (2018)	Beyond Boarding: An exploration of post-boarding expectations, experiences and outcomes for remote Aboriginal students, their families and communities.	Aboriginal students from remote South Australian Aboriginal communities attending a residential facility in Adelaide
Relevant MEd Research	**Title**	**Focus**
Andrew Lloyd (2019)	Interschool Partnerships: A study into effective partnership practices between an interstate boarding school community and	Aboriginal students from a single very remote Aboriginal community in the Northern territory attending a small

PhD Author	Title	Focus
	a very remote Aboriginal community.	boarding program/facility in South Australia.
Peter Barrett (2019)	Factors enabling a successful transition to boarding school for Australian Aboriginal students.	Aboriginal students from remote communities attending a single regional boarding school in the Northern Territory.

As demonstrated in Table 2.1, much of the contemporary thesis research literature in the transition space has focused on the experience of Indigenous students in a particular category or type of boarding school where students from remote indigenous communities make up a very small proportion of the overall school population. Doctoral research undertaken by Mander (2012), O'Bryan (2016) and Rogers (2016) focused on students enrolled at well-resourced non-government schools with a majority of non-Indigenous enrolments. It is also important to note that the student participants engaged in the research conducted by Mander, Rogers, O'Bryan and McCarthy came from a mix of urban, regional and remote settings. While it is clear that the transition to boarding is a complex and at times stressful experience for all Indigenous students, there are a number of factors particular to the circumstances of living in a remote Indigenous community that give the transition to boarding a character quite distinct from that experienced by Indigenous students who move from regional or urban environments into boarding. The implications of separation and distance, the degree of fluency in English as a first language and a range of potential health complications are examples of a range of factors that are of particular relevance here. In short, it would be problematic to suggest that an Indigenous student moving from a town in regional Victoria into a metropolitan boarding school in Melbourne has the same experience of transition as a student moving from a remote community in the Northern Territory who attends the same school. The research conducted by Hunter (2015), Benveniste (2018), Lloyd (2019) and Barrett (2020) focused exclusively on the transition experience of children from remote Indigenous communities.

In addition to the PhD and MEd research undertaken, a number of the authors, including those above, have worked in collaboration in making extensive contributions to a range of journals with a particular focus on the experience of Indigenous students in the Western Australian context led by David Mander. Tessa Benveniste, working in partnership with John Guenther and researchers from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation has examined the impact of boarding on remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia and led research in the Queensland boarding context on the psychosocial resilience of Indigenous students and the effectiveness of the work of the Queensland Transition Support Service. Guenther and Fogarty (2018) summarize this growth in research in the field as a "mini-explosion of new research that highlights the boarding school issues related to First Nations students" (p.3).

Further to the research literature, it is important to identify a range of government commissioned reports and inquiries which have had either an exclusive focus on, or significant focus on the transition to boarding, including the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. A number of key reports and inquiries tabled below have also drawn on the recent research and many of their recommendations and conclusions have been shaped in large part by key findings in the research.

Table 2.2

Reports, Reviews and Inquiries Engaging with the Transition to Boarding

Report/Inquiry Title	Commissioned By	Significance for remote Indigenous Boarding
1.Review of Australia's Welfare System (2013-2015) (McClure Review)	Australian Government Department of Social Services	Recommended significant changes to the role of Abstudy in supporting Indigenous boarding students.
2. A Share in the Future. Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory (2013/14 Wilson Review)	Northern Territory Government	Recommended expansion of boarding as an option in the Northern Territory. Led to the creation of the Transition Support Unit in the Northern Territory.
3.Creating Parity (2014) (The Forrest Review)	Australian Government	Recommended expansion of support for Indigenous boarding.
4.KPMG Review of Non-Government Indigenous Boarding (2016)	Northern Territory Government	Highlighted the significant cost issues in providing quality boarding education for remote Indigenous students.
5. The Power of Education: From Surviving to Thriving. Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students (2017)	Australian Government House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (HORSCIA Report)	Significant focus on remote education and the high failure rates in Indigenous boarding. Called for wholesale reform of the boarding sector and funding.
6.Price Waterhouse Coopers Review of the Transition Support Service (2017)	Queensland Government Department of Education	Recommended significant reform to the way transition support is delivered for remote Indigenous students in Queensland. Significant focus areas: transition readiness, governance, data profiling, service expansion.
7. The Study Away Review. Review of Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Secondary Students Studying Away From Home. (2017)	Australian Government	Recommended significant changes to the ways all forms of support are provided to Indigenous students in boarding. Central focus on Abstudy
8.Barriers and Bureaucracy, Bridges and Brokers (2017)	Independent Schools Council of Australia	Recommended sweeping changes to the administration of Abstudy and all forms of

Report/Inquiry Title	Commissioned By	Significance for remote Indigenous Boarding
		support for Indigenous boarding students.
9. Review of the IAS funded secondary school scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students (2017.)	Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet	Recommended significant changes to all forms of the administration and management of scholarship programs targeting Indigenous boarding students.
10.Boarding: investing in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (2019)	Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet	Recommended significant reform of support for Indigenous boarding students. Changes to data recording, a focus on health services for students and needs based funding recommended.
11.Closing the Gap Report (2013 to present)	Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, now National Indigenous Australians Agency	Focus on Indigenous education outcomes, especially Year 12 completion rates.
12.Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2012–2017)	Australian Government	Held hearings with specific reference to Indigenous boarding. Recommended implementation of mandatory standards. Directly responsible for the closure of Shalom College, an Indigenous only boarding school in Townsville, Queensland in November 2017.

There is probably no other single aspect of Indigenous education, especially that which pertains to the remote context, which has received as much attention as the transition to boarding in recent years. As is the case with the growth in research interest, the reports and inquiries outlined in Table 2.2 point to the fact that the transition is, for many remote students, potentially problematic and a number of key themes appear consistently in the qualitative and quantitative data presentations and subsequent recommendations that emerge from this element of the literature. The most significant of these include the perceived quality of remote primary and secondary education as measured by attendance and levels of literacy and numeracy, the impact of home-sickness and separation created by leaving community for secondary school, the quality of boarding service provision in terms of catering to the specific needs of children in transition, the inadequacy of resourcing required to meet the needs of students, and the importance of appropriate and structured forms of support for the transition to boarding. These and a number of other key themes that also emerge from the research literature will now be examined in detail.

2.4 The Transition to Boarding: Recurring Themes in the Literature

With the recent 'mini-explosion' in literature in the transition space referred to earlier by Guenther and Fogarty (2018), it is important that this review will now focus on a number of key recurring themes that have served to shape the current discourse around this complex and contested space. As stated earlier, it is clear from a thorough review of literature, both the research and the government or independently commissioned reviews, reports and inquiries, is that the transition to boarding appears to be problematic for a significant number of Indigenous students, especially those from remote communities. Indeed, while the research points to the potentially positive outcomes for students, many of whom have experienced backgrounds characterized by considerable levels of generalized disadvantage, the reality exposed by the literature is that the transition is a time of great difficulty for many students. Well prior to the recent growth in interest in the transition space, Duncan (1990) researched the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children transitioning into two non-government boarding schools in Queensland with the aim of determining possible solutions to the problems encountered in maintaining attendance at school. His research identified issues around homesickness, loss of connection to culture and lifestyle and stereotyping and negative attitudes encountered in schools as fundamental to the ability of students to adjust to and succeed in the boarding environment. Writing of his experience in working with remote communities in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, McCoy (2011) states that while remote communities and their parents and care-givers have high hopes for their young people who leave to pursue a quality education, these hopes are often not realized. "Principals, teachers and residential carers respond generously. Yet for many, the hoped-for transition often doesn't work" (p.6). It is important to understand the confluence of often-interrelated factors that underpin McCoy's stark observation. The first of these factors resides in history.

2.4.1 Boarding Schools and Indigenous People: A Problematic Past

One of the of the key themes that emerge from the literature pertaining to the transition of children from remote Indigenous communities, such as Lockhart River, to boarding schools and residential facilities is that there is a history connected to boarding that transcends national borders which, for many Indigenous communities around the world, evokes memories of the worst excesses of colonial pasts characterized by policies that were at their worst racist and at their best paternalistic and dismissive of the rights of colonized Indigenous populations. It is an inescapable reality that:

> Indigenous peoples generally argue that the historic purpose of boarding schools was to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the dominant society of which they lived. These schools were frequently administered in cooperation with Christian missions with the expressed purpose of Christianising Indigenous peoples, particularly in Latin America, North America, the Arctic, Asia and the Pacific (Smith, 2009, p. 3).

Smith's work points to the universality of the experience of boarding schools and residential facilities for Indigenous students in almost all settings where education could be regarded as an expression of and outcome of colonialism and the concomitant denial of the rights of Indigenous people to seek an education that both acknowledged and supported connection to Indigenous culture, language and connection to community. Summarising the impact of boarding on Indigenous peoples worldwide, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues stated starkly that:

> As a whole, boarding schools were generally a failure at improving the lives of indigenous peoples. The reason is that their purpose was not to benefit indigenous peoples; rather it was to forcibly assimilate indigenous children into the larger society. Consequently, the dictates of the larger society took precedence over the needs of indigenous peoples. In addition, the fact that boarding school attendance was often mandatory deprived indigenous peoples of their right to self-determination (United Nations, 2010, p. 28).

There are important parallels to be drawn from the experience of Indigenous Australians and their experience of education, especially that which involved the physical relocation and institutionalisation of children in residential settings, with that of Indigenous people internationally. The most widely documented examples of the forced removal of Indigenous children into residential settings come from Canada where the government instituted a Truth and Reconciliation Commission which held hearings across Canada in the period 2007-2015 to bring to light the extent of the abuse of children as a consequence of government policy.

In an official 2008 apology to those who suffered under the residential school system in Canada, a system which began in the early 1880's, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated that:

> Two primary objectives of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child." Today we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country (Government of Canada, 2008).

The work of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its findings and recommendations led directly to the closure of the last of the facilities that had made up an extensive network of residential schools run by both the state and religious bodies through the implementation of state-sanctioned policy.

The issues highlighted through an examination of the Canadian experience are mirrored in the United States, where the experience of Indigenous people in residential facilities in Alaska, in particular, has been the focus of extensive research (Cassidy, 2009; Graves, 2007; Hirshberg and

Sharpe, 2002; Jacobs, 2006).Graves (2007) conducted interviews with 62 former boarding school students who had attended Alaskan boarding schools between the late 1950' and early 1970's and identified a number of key themes which emerged from the respondents' boarding school/home experiences. Key among these were:

- Many had positive experiences
- Most had maintained a positive outlook despite difficulties
- Respondents' lives were disrupted by the experience
- Younger boarding school attendees had more problems adjusting
- Communities were affected by the boarding school experience
- Respondents lost language and cultural traditions
- Cultural identity was disrupted
- Parenting skills were negatively impacted
- Many had difficulties maintaining relationships

This research is of particular value in articulating respondents' articulations of the practices, activities and family attributes that assisted them through the boarding experience and in the years beyond. "These include: ceremonies, cultural practices, family involvement, being raised traditionally, the process of reconnecting following boarding school, religious and spiritual connections, continuing education, and self-reliance" (Graves, 2007, p. ii.).

The key findings of Graves's work, which has a strong focus on dealing with the impact of trauma, both on those who experienced the abuse of forced removal and intergenerational trauma, are replicated in research conducted in the Alaskan context by Barnhardt (2001), Cassidy (2009), Hirshberg and Sharpe (2002) and Jacobs (2006).

In articulating the shift that has occurred in the New Zealand context in terms of how boarding schools have operated across the cultural divide, the divide between the colonizer and the colonized, Rogers (2016) states that:

> While Maori boarding schools may originally have been established with aims of assimilation, they have developed into culturally inclusive schools. The Aoteroa-New Zealand Government has 'recognized the role schools played in the implementation of their assimilationist policies. They also recognize the significant role schools have to play in re-dressing the disadvantage created as a legacy of these policies' (Maughan, 2012, p. 4), with subsequent school reform based on the Treaty of Waitangi. (p. 52).

The impact of Australia's past in shaping much of the modern discourse around Indigenous education, in particular the role of boarding schools and residential facilities, is an important and recurring theme in the recent literature. In contextualizing her research in to the experience of

Indigenous scholarship students attending elite non-government schools in Victoria, O'Bryan (2016) states that:

> Australia's post-colonial history casts a long and sobering shadow over the contemporary landscape of Indigenous policy in general and Indigenous education policy in particular. However compelling the social imperatives which recommend boarding over community-based education, any initiative which separates young people from their families, communities, languages and cultures must be examined through the prism of the past if the repetition of past mistakes is to be avoided (p. 9).

Mander's research with Aboriginal boys attending secondary boarding schools in Perth is prefaced with the observation that, "Experiences such as colonization, massacres, genocide, the forcible removal of children from families, social and cultural marginalization and racism have all made a contribution to the construction of the contemporary context of Indigenous Education" (2012, p.16). The emphasis on the centrality of past practices in shaping the nature of the current transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students also features prominently in research conducted by Barrett (2019), Benveniste (2018), Bobongie, (2017), Gillan et al. (2017), Guenther et al. (2017), Lloyd (2019), Parsons (2019) and Rogers (2016). The need for current practices in Indigenous boarding to be clearly distanced from past practices that were so deeply rooted in policies based on racial superiority and the expressed desire to inculcate Indigenous children into non-Indigenous ways of living is a recurring theme in contemporary research literature. Indeed, much of the criticism levelled at contemporary boarding practices derives from the view that they are not sufficiently or explicitly distanced from past practices, especially when it comes to matters such as the value and recognition by Western educational institutions of Indigenous forms of knowledge and the conduct of respectful relationships between these boarding institutions and the Indigenous communities from which their students come. The complexities inherent here are clearly articulated by McDonald et al. (2018) who state that while the recent research highlights the motivations expressed by Indigenous families who seek a boarding school education for their children, "this work has also pointed out the difficulties faced by students transitioning to and from boarding schools, the prevalence of Eurocentric attitudes amongst staff, and experiences that result in culture shock and identity dissonance" (p. 4).

The importance of articulating the central role played by factors of history and policies that have their origins in history was further highlighted through the deliberations, finding and recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse conducted between 2013 and 2017. The interest of the Commission in the education of Indigenous children in boarding schools and residential facilities was brought about by a series of incidents at Shalom Christian College, an Indigenous-only day and boarding school located in Townsville. In investigating a series of sexual assaults, the Commission brought to light a range of serious issues

around the physical, emotional and sexual health and safety of children already made vulnerable by the fact that they were living well away from their home communities. The Commission drew on the significant issues inherent in the highly problematic conduct of institutions established through implementation of essentially racist and discriminatory and assimilationist policies in stating that, "the legacies of past social practices and policies, the Stolen Generation and the long-term intergenerational impacts of colonization all increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's vulnerability to abuse in institutions" (Royal Commission, 2017, p. 1). Commission recommendations regarding the conduct of boarding providers and the implementation of mandatory standards in Indigenous boarding and the safety and well-being of vulnerable students are discussed in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

The movement of large numbers of children from remote Indigenous communities in Australia into boarding schools and residential facilities has created a discussion as to whether what is happening can be seen to replicate historical practices of the removal of Indigenous children from their home environments into institutions that were strongly assimilationist in both intent and operation.

Such a view has been sharply criticized by Indigenous leader Noel Pearson. He is dismissive of the notion that the move to send all secondary school aged children away to boarding schools represents a repetition of the stolen generations as "just plain silly" (Pearson, p. 299). In an address to a seminar on Indigenous education from international perspectives conducted by the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation he argued that:

> There are critical differences between the use of boarding schools and residential policies of the past. Now jealous mothers are backing their children for a better shot at life by sending their children away for these opportunities. Too often we don't search for these opportunities. We have to be continually vigilant that policy doesn't have unintended consequences. (Australian Government, 2007, p. 11)

His views regarding the transition to boarding as creating opportunities are shared by prominent Indigenous academic Marcia Langton.

> It's quite wrong to refer to this as …. a new stolen generation because Aboriginal parents willingly send their children to these schools. They want their children to have a good education so the conditions are there for them to perform much better. (ABC Lateline, 2013)

The views expressed by Pearson and Langton are shared by a number of other Indigenous leaders, including Waverley Stanley who established the Yalari scholarship program and Warren Mundine who serves on the board of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF), the biggest provider of scholarships to Indigenous students in Australia. In articulating the inappropriate nature of comparisons between boarding in its recent form with the policies of the past, both in Australia and in other countries with strong histories of the ongoing negative impacts of colonization,

they serve to highlight what has become an increasingly important theme in the recent literature, that of the role to be played by boarding facilities in addressing generalized disadvantage and creating opportunities for students from remote Indigenous communities.

While acknowledging the importance of the policies of the past, both in Australia and in other countries with strong histories of the negative impacts of colonization, McDonald et al. (2018) argue that there are three important distinctions to be made between present Indigenous boarding frameworks and the policies of the past. In the present transition to boarding environment:

- Indigenous parents are exercising choice regarding the movement to boarding and the choice of school. Previous policies allowed for no Indigenous input;
- policies and practices of the past deliberately 'de-cultured' students. While issues of racism and cultural incompetence are still commonly recounted in the research literature there is no deliberate attempt to deny students their cultural integrity;
- current boarding programs aim at educational parity and the creation of aspiration for Indigenous children and their families. Education has a goal beyond preparing students for lives as low-skilled, low paid workers. (McDonald et al., 2018)

The essentially negative characterization of the current role of boarding schools and residential facilities in countries such as Canada, the United States and Australia as resonant with the practices of a highly problematic colonial past is similarly challenged by Bass (2014) through reference to the role now played by boarding providers in the United States. Her work is of critical importance in terms of a focus on both the legacies of history and the key role boarding schools can play in addressing disparities experienced by minorities in the exercise of the various forms of capital. Bass (2014) states that:

> I readily acknowledge that boarding schools were unfortunately also used negatively as tools to transform and or to socialize Native Americans (and possibly others) against their will; however, this analysis focuses on the boarding school environment as part of a revolutionary school reform package for contemporary times, which has the potential to impact the educational outcomes of students from high poverty backgrounds, including African American students and other students of colour. (p. 18)

It is a view shared by Jackson (2010) who researched the lived experience of economically disadvantaged black students attending predominantly white, elite private boarding schools in the United States. While acknowledging a range of transition challenges faced by students in their transition into a very different school environment Jackson states simply that, "Black parents are selecting private schools based on a desire for their children to benefit from the cultural capital provided in integrated environments" (p. 3). In the context of the role to be played by boarding schools

and residential facilities in addressing the educational, socio-economic and health disadvantage experience by Indigenous Australians, especially those living in remote environments, Bass' work is congruent with the views expressed earlier by Noel Pearson in refuting the comparisons between the modern-day movement of Indigenous students into boarding and the Stolen Generations. Himself a boarding student at St Peter's Lutheran College in Brisbane, Pearson (2011) writes that:

> Almost all of the Indigenous people from remote Australia who have succeeded in education and who have gone on to make a leading contribution on behalf of their people were educated at boarding schools, often a long way from their homes, most often at church schools. In Cape York Peninsula, no Aboriginal tertiary graduates have come from local public secondary schools. It is on this past practice - its successes as well as its failures - that we base our policy in Cape York Peninsula: scholarships to high-quality, high-expectations secondary schools down south. (pp. 298–299)

In the years since Pearson's stark assessment of the limited opportunities that come with being educated in remote community schools on Cape York, it is still the case that no tertiary outcomes have been achieved for Indigenous students from remote communities in Cape York who were educated through their participation in secondary programs offered in their home communities. Put simply, to engage in a tertiary pathway demands an engagement with education away from home. The view that access to boarding schools creates opportunities for students that are not available to them in their home communities is not new and the practice of students boarding away from home "has been in place for more than 50 years, with many Indigenous communities having long-standing strong connections to particular schools with boarding facilities. Boarding options are increasingly being touted as a positive option to address educational needs as well as being powerful in building social capital" (Pearson, 2011; Wilson, 2013, as cited in Gillan et al., 2017, p. 63).

2.4.2 Boarding Creating Opportunity

Pearson's and Wilson's reference above to boarding as an option to address educational needs of remote Indigenous students highlights a key theme in the literature that was highlighted in Section 2.1, where the impact of remoteness and the quality and availability of remote education provision was discussed as a key factor in shaping the transition to boarding. Both research literature and recent reports, inquiries and reviews that have a direct or indirect focus on the transition to boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities point to boarding as creating education and life opportunities for students from remote Indigenous communities. The view that education away from community will provide opportunities not accessible at home is predicated on two closely related factors, the perceived quality and availability of local secondary education in remote Indigenous communities and the impact of a range of negative social factors in these communities on education participation.

The perceived quality of local education service provision as highly problematic and a key driver in students leaving their home communities is widely documented in the literature. The 2013 Wilson Review of education in the Northern Territory, an important precursor to the implementation of policy promoting boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities, stated that:

> The NT has made substantial efforts to deliver secondary schooling in remote settings for more than a decade, with limited success. Enrolments and attendance in these schools decline rapidly during the secondary years, NAPLAN results show very low success rates and there have been very few Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training (NTCECT) completion (Wilson, 2013, p. 22).

One of the key elements of support for boarding to emerge from the Wilson review was the creation of the Northern Territory Transition Support Unit (TSU), established to provide structured support to students and families from all remote Northern Territory communities. In recounting the views of parent informants in the Western Australian context, Mander (2012) stated that they:

> Acknowledged that schools in regional and remote locations of WA faced a number of logistical obstacles and all reported feeling disenchanted and disempowered by a system that did little to address the provision of secondary education pathways in regional and remote locations of the state (p. 186).

The problematic nature of the quality of local secondary schooling and the notion of the transition to boarding creating opportunities for young Indigenous boys and girls is a recurring theme in research conducted in number of other jurisdictions including that done by Hunter (2015) and Lloyd (2019) in the Northern Territory, Benveniste (2018) in South Australia and Bobongie (2017), McCarthy (2013) and Rogers (2016) in their work with students and their families in the Queensland context.

A range of negative social conditions that are a reflection of the deep and entrenched disadvantage so often visible in remote Indigenous communities and that impact on the operation of remote schools, especially secondary schools, are highlighted in the literature as an important factor in Indigenous parents choosing to send their children to boarding schools and residential facilities rather than remain in community. Rogers (2016) echoes student voice in her research with girls in Brisbane boarding schools who, despite the challenges inherent in adjusting to the demands of boarding school, are well aware of the impact of the social disadvantage that so often characterizes life in community. One participant in her research stated candidly that:

> It's like, at home, young teenage girls. Pregnant. I have a lot of cousins who end up in a lot of fights because they are pregnant to other people's boyfriends and stuff. There is no chance that I will be returning to my home after uni. Not at all. No chance I will go back home after I

> finish! It's not a place you want to raise kids in. It's an ice [drug] epidemic right now. Since coming here I've broadened my horizons about opportunities and that. I want to go. I want to go back, but then I don't… but yeah. But I want to help my community, help my family out (student participant, as cited in Rogers, 2016, p. 150).

The views expressed here regarding the difficulties facing secondary school aged children in remote Indigenous communities resonate through student and parent participants in both contemporary research and in a number of the reports, inquiries and reviews highlighted earlier in this chapter in Table 2.2. Parsons (2019, p. 156) articulates this sense of expectation that boarding will deliver on the promise of opportunities and expectations being fulfilled in stating that:

> Indigenous students recently attending boarding schools did so with the expectation that a boarding school education would improve their life outcomes, particularly by broadening their career options (McDonald et al., 2018; O'Bryan, 2016). 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 (Bobongie, 2017a, 2017b; McDonald et al., 2018).

A significant number of the 131 written submissions and many of the public representations and appearances made by individuals, researchers, Indigenous community organisations and peak education bodies made to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students also point to the significant challenges inherent in remote secondary education delivery. These submissions and records of representation to the Inquiry and the subsequent final report of the Committee published in 2017, represent a comprehensive set of widely divergent views on the transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students.

While highlighting the challenges outlined above, they also point to the fact that the transition to boarding is highly problematic and it has been that way for a significant period of time. It is only in recent years, with a significant increase in research focus, that the transition space is receiving the attention required. As the planning for this research took shape in 2012, the Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation conducted by the Australian Government stated that with respect to Aurukun, a remote Indigenous community in Far North Queensland:

> 50 per cent of secondary school aged students from Aurukun who are supported to attend boarding school return to Aurukun as a result of a de-enrolling event (this includes self-exclusion, parent withdrawal, exclusion or cancellation of enrolment). On returning to Aurukun, a significant number of school-aged children do not enrol at the Aurukun campus of

> the CYAAA (Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy) and are therefore not enrolled at any school (Australian Government, 2012).

Five years later, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry would report that 'a significant proportion of students who live away from home for study return to community shortly after commencing' (2017, p. 116).

In reality, many boarding providers are totally unprepared for the challenges that come with working with children from remote Indigenous communities. Indeed, one of the most important themes to emerge from a review of what has become an extensive body of literature that has a focus either directly or indirectly on the transition to boarding, is that for many students and for their families and their wider communities, the realisation of those potential opportunities through transitioning to boarding schools and residential facilities is not achieved.

2.4.3 The Challenges of Boarding: Homesickness, Culture Shock and Cultural Discontinuity

In terms of the challenges that come with the transition to boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities, issues of homesickness that come with separation from family, community and culture, especially in the early stages of the transition process are of vital significance. Homesickness is identified across both the research literature and a number of key reviews and reports as a key factor in children struggling with the transition to boarding and potentially disengaging from secondary education on their return to their home communities.

In a submission to the final Committee report, one respondent stated that many students do not just feel homesick for their immediate family. He is quoted as follows:

> When we have homesickness, we do not have homesickness just for our immediate family. We have homesickness for our surroundings and for our extended family and entire community. It is much different in that sense. It is that balance. If we could do something to help students to get used to that balance. It is too much of a transition to come here. It is a big culture change. (James Ballangary, as cited in House of representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, Final Report, 2017, p. 114)

This articulation of the cultural challenges is also reflected in the wider literature. In her research involving students from remote Torres Strait communities attending a large regional boarding school in Queensland, Bobongie (2017) states that the cultural challenges are "a big issue because they're coming from home, they're leaving their culture and coming into a white man's world……what they do at home and down here…it's two different worlds" (p. 1145). The view that students transitioning from remote Indigenous communities must learn to 'walk in two worlds' is a key theme of Rogers (2016) research with students in Brisbane boarding schools and an important and recurring theme in Mander's 2012 doctoral research and subsequent collaborative research in the

Western Australian context. In a submission to the House of representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry that mirrored a key theme of her doctoral research, Rogers argued that that students who attend boarding school 'are open about the fact that it changes them', with students often describing their experience of boarding as 'walking in two worlds', with two sets of social and cultural norms, She added that:

> If you want to succeed in this colonised world, you have to learn the skills of the white man. That is what boarding school does. It teaches our kids how to be in two different worlds. We can skirt around that, but the more we actually explain that to our kids, the better they can understand it. (Jessa Rogers, as cited in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Final Report, 2017, p. 113)

O'Bryan's research is of particular importance here given the age and maturity of a number of her participants and their capacity to reflect on the deep complexities inherent in an articulation of the comparison between the realities of community life and the experience of being educated in an exclusive boarding school. In reflecting on the experience of one particular student O'Bryan (2016) states that:

> his account (of life at home) supports the claim that boarding schools have a role to play in the wider enterprise of recalibrating social norms in dysfunctional communities, but also emphasises the necessity for strong cultural awareness in school staff and any other people who work with First Australian boarding school students (p. 260).

Indeed, it is the perceived absence of cultural competence in boarding schools and residential facilities that is identified in much of the research literature as an issue demanding immediate attention if apparently poor retention rates for remote Indigenous students in boarding are to be addressed. In his research into the experience of Aboriginal boys in Independent schools in Western Australia, Mander states bluntly that:

> If boarding schools believe they have a social responsibility to offer an alternative secondary education pathway to families in regional and remote communities, then they must first ensure their schools are safe and inclusive places for Aboriginal students to inhabit (Mander et al., 2015, p. 324).

Without boarding providers acknowledging the complexities inherent in the transition and responding with school-wide practices that promote and demonstrate respect for Indigenous worldviews it is clear that many students will be unable to take full advantage of the potential opportunities afforded by boarding. In articulating the potentially formative nature of the experience of boarding for Indigenous students, particularly those who come from remote and very remote areas, through exposure to new academic, cultural, social and economic norms, McDonald et al. (2018)

states that “these experiences can create dissonance, frustration and culture shock, as well as the opportunity for growth and development”(p. 13). She writes that in order to maximise the opportunities for growth and development and deal appropriately and sensitively with the issues students face when disconnected from community, that boarding schools and their leadership must do more than rely on events to promote Indigenous culture while at the same time remaining “unaware of institutionalised racism and ‘white-washed’ curricula within, their schools” (2018, p. 19).

2.5 Theoretical Underpinnings

The role played by boarding schools and residential facilities in addressing disadvantage through providing opportunities for the building of social, cultural, economic and other forms of capital is an increasingly important theme in the research literature. It is also where there appears to be the sharpest disconnect between theory and policy development and implementation. In responding to one of the key and most controversial recommendations of the report entitled “A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory” (The Wilson Review), which argued for a focus on children from remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory attending boarding schools rather than attending secondary school in their home communities, the Commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Affairs stated that:

> The evidence of education and, as a consequence, employment outcomes achieved by Indigenous children who attend boarding schools is indisputable. There are clear benefits for children attending senior schooling away from their home base and the pressures that can negatively impact on schooling. (Australian Newspaper, Feb. 12, 2014)

The notion of these ‘clear benefits’ is contested in the literature. In examining a range of issues and questions relevant to addressing educational disadvantage in the Indigenous context, Biddle (2011) stated that there were a number of important school-related research questions that we really know very little about. In terms of this research, the most significant question he presents is, “Do Indigenous children who attend boarding schools in cities as opposed to their local schools in regional or remote areas have better outcomes than if they stayed where they were?” (Biddle, 2011, p. 22).

Guenther and Fogarty (2018) argue that the assertion that remote Indigenous students who attend boarding schools and residential facilities achieve education and employment outcomes clearly superior to those of their peers who remain in community is not supported by evidence. In contesting Scullion’s assertion they state that, “The problem with this statement is that there is no research evidence base on which to make this claim, and as we have shown, based on evidence that is available, the outcomes of boarding schools are at best mixed” (p.12). In terms of the recent research outlined in Table 2.1, they state that “current research (Guenther et al. 2016; Mander et al., 2015b; O’Bryan, 2016; Rogers,2016) suggests that a major factor in anecdotally high attrition rates of First Nations

boarding school students may be the opportunity cost to an individual's accumulation of social capital in home communities" (p.9).

The importance of Guenther and Fogarty's work lies in providing an appropriate theoretical lens, that of capital theory, through which the complex and contested nature of the role of boarding schools and residential facilities in the education of remote Indigenous students can be examined. The table below summarises the key capital theories they have adopted through which claims regarding the expected and potential outcomes of a boarding school education can be assessed.

Table 2.3

Summary of Expected and Potential Outcomes of Adopting Capitals Approaches

Capital	How it should work for students attending boarding schools	How it can work (based on the evidence)
Human Capital Theory	- Individuals make a choice to invest in their education because of the perceived and actual return on the investment - Communities benefit through increased productivity - Education leads to improved employment pathways and higher income	- Individuals may perceive a net cost to education and therefore choose not to invest - Communities may lose human capital if students choose not to return to communities - Pathways from education and training to work may be avoided in favor of alternative livelihood options - Income benefit may not materialize
Social Capital Theory	- Investment in social capital gives access to wealth through social structures - Communities strengthen through links to external sources of power	- identification with powerful social structures may lead to exclusion from community power structures and lateral violence - External sources of power act to protect and control resources to the exclusion of communities - Lost opportunities to engage in the local cultural economy
Identity Capital Theory	- Investment in identity capital confirms role development consistent with ontologies associated with schooling - Agency/choice/self-investment leads to improved health and well-being outcomes-Students become confident walking in 'two worlds'	- Conformity to educational identity expectations/aspirations may lead to identity confusion/crisis - Conflicting identities may lead to ill-health and loss of cultural identity.

Source: Guenther and Fogarty (2018, p.11).

In terms of an articulation of the appropriateness of using the lens of human capital through which to examine the claims made for remote Indigenous students to attend boarding schools and residential facilities as opposed to accessing secondary options in community, Guenther and Fogarty draw on the traditional economic theories originally attributed to Adam Smith wherein:

Individuals make decisions about education based on the economic return from their investment in knowledge. In short, the longer an individual stays in education the greater return on investment. The push to see more young people go to boarding can be seen as an attempt to increase economic productivity through education (p. 3).

Cote (1996) elaborates further in stating that "human capital theory has had a strong impact on educational policies around the world as is based on the assumption that the inculcation of skill-oriented knowledge generates economic activity" (p.424). This would be the view articulated earlier by then Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion in speaking of the supposed employment outcomes achieved by students who board for their secondary education as opposed to those who remain in education and serves to underpin the strong policy and subsequent financial support for boarding as evidenced by programs such as Abstudy, government support for the construction of new Indigenous-only boarding facilities such as AFL House and NRL House in Queensland and strong financial support for scholarship programs.

In the context of the transition to boarding school for remote Indigenous students it is within theories related to the concept of identity capital that issues regarding the ability to 'walk in two worlds' and the challenges regarding homesickness, cultural discontinuity discussed in Section 2.4.5 are most commonly referenced in the contemporary research literature. Cote (1996) argues that:

> The term "identity capital' denotes what individuals "invest" in "who they are." These investments potentially reap future dividends in "identity markets" of late modern communities. To be a player in these markets, one must first establish a stable sense of self which is bolstered by the following: social and technical skills in a variety of areas; effective behavioural repertoires; psychosocial development to more advanced levels; and associations in key social and occupational networks. (p. 425)

Occurring as it does at such a critical time in adolescent development, the transition to boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities is heavily scrutinised in contemporary research literature for its capacity to disrupt what Cote has described above as a 'stable sense of self.' Guenther and Fogarty (2018) synthesise this research in speaking of the transition as 'leading not only to identity confusion but crisis' and while there is evidence of parental choice in the decision for children to go to boarding schools and residential facilities for secondary education:

> This should not be at the expense of their identities connected to language, Country, kinship and law (Guenther, Disbray and Osborne, 2015, 2016). While the quest for 'both ways' education is often expressed as a hope, the ability to 'walk in two world' or 'orbit' (ABC, 2016; Benveniste et al., 2015; Burin, 2017; Hunter, 2015; Pearson, 2005) is often not realised or leads to compromises, such as that the young person must make choices about the world

> which he or she belongs in (Mander et al., 2015; McCalman et al., 2016; O'Bryan, 2016). (p. 10)

The Australian research outlined reflects key findings in Bass (2014) and her research into the impact of boarding schools in ameliorating the disadvantage faced by marginalized students in the United States. She states that when students "leave a home life far different than that of the schools they attend, they risk losing some of their old culture……..they risk no longer blending into their families and friendships they formerly held, which may cause their foundational relationships to suffer" (p.31).

The research outlined and referenced earlier further exposes the high rates of attrition and drop-out indicating that a great deal of work still needs to be done if boarding is to achieve its stated aims for remote Indigenous students while at the same time not placing at risk their long-term health, well-being and sense of identity.

Social capital theory, is most commonly associated with the theoretical framework of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu whose "work is one of the few coherent accounts of the central role that schools have in reproducing social and cultural inequalities from one generation to the next" (Harker, 1984, p.117). Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, developed in the 1970's centres on the ability of societal elites to maintain their power, privilege and wealth through the maintenance and manipulation of structures regulating the operation of fundamental societal processes such as education. While one of the fundamental purposes of education in modern societies should be to facilitate or enable marginalised and disadvantaged groups to elevate their social status through their access to and participation in quality education comprehensive programs, theories of social capital posit that existing structures work in fact to make access and participation difficult if not impossible for many.

Bourdieu's articulation of how the various forms of capital; economic, social and cultural might work in the education space to either promote or stifle the opportunities for marginalised populations to enhance their position in society is of particular relevance to the Indigenous boarding space. One of the key drivers behind the promotion of boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities is the opportunity it is intended to provide for students to develop the social and interpersonal networks, the social capital, that will allow them to participate fully in life beyond their home communities. Indigenous leader Noel Pearson's advocacy of boarding as a solution to the problems of remote education in Cape York communities is built around the view that boarding creates a range of individual and collective opportunities that will never be available to young people in remote Indigenous communities. In writing of the success of one student from a remote Cape York community, Pearson's Cape York Leadership Program (a scholarship program) website states that:

> With ongoing support from his family, Cape York Leadership Program and the school community, (scholarship student) has gone from strength to strength. He has big goals for the future with aspirations to join the Australian Defence Force. The opportunities are endless for (scholarship student) as he continues his Academic and Leadership journey. We believe stepping into the role of Boarding Captain will continually encourage new challenges and continue to build confidence and independence. Cape York Leaders Program are excited to see (scholarship student's) achievements in his final year of high school (Cape York Partnerships, 2019).

The ability of Indigenous boarding students to build their social capital by broadening their social networks through participation in the very wide range of educational and extra-curricular programs not available in remote communities is for Pearson and other Indigenous leaders such as Warren Mundine a clear justification for the ongoing support of scholarship programs funded by the Australian government.

However, the role played by social capital cannot in education generally and in the transition to boarding in particular cannot be fully understood without an articulation of the key role played by cultural capital. For Bourdieu, cultural capital, which is "a form of value associated with culturally authorized tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and awards" (Webb, Shirato and Daniher in Bass, 2014), plays a vital role in allowing students to build the networks and relationships necessary for success in educational settings. Bourdieu identified three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. In its embodied form it is identified as personalities, speech, skills and dispositions. Its objectified form is in the form of cultural goods or belongings such as clothes or other belongings while the institutionalized form is manifested in educational attainment or specialized forms of knowledge. For Indigenous students transitioning from remote communities into boarding, the possession of appropriate froms of cultural capital is an essential precondition for the development of social capital. Indigenous students moving from communities with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage into non-Indigenous education environments where the vast majority of students already possess the cultural capital required to 'fit in' may immediately feel marginalized. For example, while they may speak a number of Indigenous languages, their command of the English language may be minimal, they may not possess the clothes or personal items of other students and their ability to participate in learning and social environments so different to those at home may present considerable difficulties in adjusting to what is already a complex transition environment. In short, the cultural capital they possess may not necessarily translate into an essentially non-Indigenous environment with the same degree of value. Boarding and residential environments that demonstrate a clear commitment to the value of Indigenous forms of cultural capital are far more likely to succeed in their work with students from remote communities. Yosso (2006), argues that educational institutions must learn to

value the forms of cultural capital that minority and marginalized poulations bring with them when they enter a space controlled by the dominant culture, a point reinforced by O'Bryan in stating that:

> Where schools fail to recognize the significant bank of cultural capital those young people have brought from home, this presumably has implications for their engagement and self-concept (2016, p.69).

2.5.1 Contemporary Boarding Research and Capital Theory

Bourdieu's work regarding the operation of the various forms of capital provided the central theoretical framework used in the research mentioned above and in Section 2.4.2 by Bass (2014) in the United States. Bass argues that boarding school structures, through their ability to expose students to social, cultural and education capital, have a key role to play in supporting the life-chances of disenfranchised students from high poverty backgrounds. Bass' research has significant implications for similar research conducted in the Australian context given that one of her key conclusions revolves around the highly individualistic nature of the capital benefits gained by students from their participation in boarding largely as a consequence of their experiences prior to entering the boarding environment. She states that:

> One student may gain social capital relating to his or her social interactions during an event, while one may sit alone and have very little social discourse. The amount of cultural capital the students is able to benefit from would largely depend on his or her accumulated capital or personal background, prior knowledge and ability to process the cultural or educational experience. (Bass, 2014, p. 29)

Bass' research would indicate that student experience of boarding and therefore their ability to access the social and other forms of capital made accessible through a boarding education are in large part contingent on factors not residing in, or indeed the 'responsibility' of the boarding environment. Factors relating to students' home environments and home lives, the degree of interest or involvement of parents and guardians, individual student attitude and motivation and school quality all impact on outcomes regarding the possible acquisition of the capital benefits and networks that boarding may make available (Bass, 2014, pp. 30–31).

In researching the experience of current and past Indigenous students in elite non-government secondary boarding schools in Melbourne, O'Bryan (2016) explored themes of power, privilege and the impacts of disconnection from community, family culture and language through Bourdieu's conceptualization of the how the various forms of capital: economic, cultural, social and symbolic and the concepts of habitus and field play out in the education of Indigenous scholarship students.

O'Bryan's work is significant in articulating in great depth the difficulties experienced by Indigenous students in school settings characterized by entrenched privilege where entry into the

social networks so essential in allowing for full participation in the life of the new school proved very difficult. For many of the participants in O'Bryan's research, their experience of elite boarding schools proved to be one of stress and alienation, despite the promise of opportunity that came with the awarding of a scholarship. Guenther and Fogarty (2018, p.23) state that her research, in keeping with the findings of other recent research (Benveniste et al., 2015: Mander, Cohen and Pooley, 2015b; O'Bryan, 2016), reflects the fact that "for many students entering boarding, processes of exclusion work against access to the networks young people need in order to get ahead".

2.6 Gaps in the Research Literature

Within the 'mini-explosion' that has occurred regarding research into the transition of children from remote Indigenous communities to boarding schools and residential facilities there has been a significant emphasis on the use of qualitative research methodologies. It is also clear that with the exception of the doctoral research undertaken by Benveniste (2018) and Hunter (2015) there has been little specific focus on students from communities that can be classified as 'remote' or 'very remote.' Research undertaken by Mander (2012), Rogers (2015) and O'Bryan (2016) included Indigenous students from a range of settings, including those from larger regional centres which exhibit very different demographic and socio-economic characteristics from remote and very remote communities. There has also been no previous research with an exclusive focus on the experiences of Year 6 students and their families and community in the critical first year of transition into Year 7. This critical year is likely to expose the vulnerability of students heightened by both the complexities of the transition experience itself, the transition from primary to secondary school, and the transition from childhood into adolescence within the context of the transition from remote to distant and, likely, unafamiliar and urban locations. Given that approximately 40% of all students transitioning from remote communities are from Queensland, it is surprising that with the exception of Duncan's 1990 research, McCarthy's research that engaged with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and the work undertaken by Bobongie (2017) that focused on students from the Torres Strait, that no doctoral research has had a focus on remote Indigenous communities in Queensland. This lack of research in the remote Queensland space presents a particular opportunity to fill a long-overdue space, given that Queensland was the first state to establish formalized support for transition from remote Cape York communities through the Transition Support Service and the fact that some of the clearest examples of problems with Indigenous-only boarding facilities have occurred in the Queensland context.

2.7 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the key themes that have emerged from the literature on the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities for children from remote Indigenous communities. I have explained how the substantial growth in research literature and the literature that has emerged from a range of government inquiries and reports constitutes a significant theme in itself. Indeed, the transition has become an area of significant research focus and it is likely that this focus

will continue into the future as the opportunities emerge for quantitative research to accompany the recent interest in qualitative research.

This review of the literature has also served to contextualize the transition to boarding in Australia as it compares to nations with similar histories, largely problematic colonial histories, such as Canada and the United States. In outlining a number of the key theoretical constructs that have been used to frame the discourse around the transition to boarding, especially those that pertain to the exercise and influence of capital in its myriad forms, this review of the literature also reveals that there is a deal of 'unfinished business' when it comes to the transition to boarding. The review highlights the fact that the transition space is both complex and contested, and it is one where significant scope still exists for further research with attention to investigating the lived experiences of those involved.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The preceding chapters of this dissertation have outlined the foundations of this research through an articulation of the research context and the development of the research questions in Chapter One and a review of the burgeoning body of literature in Chapter Two. In this chapter I will outline the philosophical and methodological frameworks which guided this qualitative research, and articulate the subsequent rationale behind the selection and use of particular research methods. I will state in detail the critical importance of a clear and unambiguous understanding of how ontological, epistemological and axiological considerations work to exercise an influence on the way in which this research was conceptualized and then conducted and outline the rationale regarding the choice of an appropriate research paradigm. Given the fact that this research involved the participation of Indigenous students and adults and that all data collection activities were conducted within the very remote Indigenous community of Lockhart River, I will detail how the critical cross-cultural and ethical considerations inherent in the research were managed in a manner consistent with best practice as identified in the relevant research literature, current guidelines for research in working with Indigenous communities and the highest standards of ethical practice.

An elaboration of how the tensions that exist between essentially Western/non-Indigenous ways of knowing and doing and Indigenous ways of knowing and doing can be reconciled in this research setting will be a key focus of this chapter. The chapter will also provide a detailed elaboration of how the practicalities inherent in the conduct of this research were managed in a manner consistent with the highest standards of qualitative research. It will conclude with a comprehensive description of the key methods employed in the conduct of this research, including data collection and methods of data analysis.

3.1 Philosophical Framework

The desire to give voice to the children and adults of Lockhart River in terms of how they experience the transition to boarding served to shape both the philosophical and methodological framework that guided this qualitative research and subsequently shaped the way in which the research was conducted. Cresswell (2007), states that, “The research design process in qualitative research begins with philosophical assumptions that the inquirers make in deciding to undertake a qualitative study. In addition, researchers bring their own worldviews, paradigms or sets of beliefs to the research project and these inform the conduct and writing of the qualitative study” (p.15).

In articulating what is perhaps the key distinction between qualitative and quantitative research and highlighting the potential impact of researchers’ worldviews, paradigms and sets of beliefs, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) state that:

> As qualitative researchers we are not separate from the study, with limited contact with our participants. Instead, we are firmly in all aspects of the research process and essential to it. The stories of participants are immediate and real to us; individual voices are not lost in a pool of numbers. We carry these individuals with us as we work with the transcripts. The words, representing experiences, are clear and lasting. (p. 61)

It is therefore critical to examine the critical interplay between the researcher and their research in terms of the influence of key philosophical assumptions and their implications for the conduct of qualitative research. These are outlined in the table below.

Table 3.1

Philosophical Assumptions with Implications for Practice

Assumption	Question	Characteristics	Implications for Practice (Examples)
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is subjective and multiple as seen by participants in the study.	Researcher uses quotes and themes in words of participants and provides evidence of different perspectives
Epistemological	What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?	Researcher attempts to lessen distance between himself or herself and that being researched.	Researcher collaborates, spends time in field with participants, and becomes an "insider."
Axiological	What is the role of values?	Researcher acknowledges that research is value-laden and that biases are present.	Researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes his or her own interpretation in conjunction with the interpretation of the participants.
Methodological	What is the process of research?	Researcher uses inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design.	Researcher works with particulars (details) before generalizations, describes in detail the context of the study, and continually revises questions from experiences in the field.

Adapted from Cresswell (2007, p.15)

Creswell's descriptions of the key philosophical assumptions that determine the nature and shape of qualitative research provide an important starting point for researchers in determining a logical link between those assumptions and the nature and conduct of the research. A brief examination of each of the key philosophical assumptions is important here. Such an examination serves to underscore the importance of choices made with respect to what is regarded in all the

research literature, but particularly qualitative research in the social sciences, as a critical stage in the research process: that of the determining an appropriate research paradigm. Each of these key philosophical assumptions will now be dealt with in turn.

3.1.1 Ontological Assumptions

Cresswell states that "the ontological issue relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics. When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities. Different researchers embrace different realities as do also the individuals being studied and the readers of a qualitative study. When studying individuals, researchers conduct a study with the intent of reporting these multiple realities" (2007, p.18). Kivunja and Kuyini write that ontological considerations are critical in allowing the researcher to understand fully their own belief systems and philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of being, existence and reality. This understanding is a critical precondition in allowing meaning to be constructed from the data gathered during the research process. They argue that, "These assumptions, concepts or propositions help to orient your thinking about the research problem, its significance, and how you might approach it so as to answer your research question, understand the problem and contribute to its solution" (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p.27). Chilisa and Kawuliach (2017) state simply that, "ontology relates to whether we believe there is one verifiable reality or whether there exist multiple socially constructed realities" (p. 1). Neuman (2014, as cited in Ham, 2018) articulates two key positions regarding ontological thought:

- "An objective, or realist approach that assumes that the 'real world' exists external to the research and that this can be recorded through scientific study. This allows research to be viewed as an objective process of discovery from a perceived objective position.
- The subjective approach assumes the opposite: that reality does not exist apart from a social or individual interpretation of reality within the context of humanity. This approach positions the researcher within the collection of data as they subjectively interpret reality from their point of view at a point in time. It espouses that all research is subjective as the information is filtered through both the participants' and researcher's subjective realities". (p. 3)

It is clear from an earlier articulation of the nature and context of this research that it would have a strongly subjective orientation given the desire to articulate the perspectives of a wide range of individuals regarding their experience of a phenomenon, in this case the transition of children from their homes in remote Indigenous communities to boarding schools and residential facilities. While it could be assumed that the research will reveal common threads or themes, it is clear that the experience of the transition will be felt and then articulated in very different ways by participants in the research.

3.1.2 Epistemological Assumptions

With its aetiology attributed to the Greek 'episteme,' epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with study of knowledge, what constitutes knowledge and how it is that we come to know something. "Epistemology inquires into the nature of truth. It asks the following questions: What are the sources of knowledge? How reliable are these sources? What can one know? How does one know if something is true?" (Kawulich and Chilisa, 2012, p.2). In articulating the very close relationship between a researcher's beliefs about the nature of knowledge, truth and reality and the conduct of their research, Kivunja and Kuyina (2017) state that "epistemology is important because, it helps you establish the faith you put in your data. It effects how you will go about uncovering knowledge in the social context that you will investigate" (p. 27). There is a clear connection between ontology and epistemology. "Ontology and epistemology are to research what 'footings' are to a house: they form the foundations of the whole edifice" (Grix, 2004, p. 59, as cited in Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

In the context of this research, my commitment to the importance of a theoretical and practical understanding of the importance of Indigenous epistemologies was a key element of both the planning and conduct of the research. This will be discussed in detail Section 3.3.

3.1.3 Axiological Assumptions

Axiological consideration in qualitative research relate very clearly to the values and ethical considerations that researchers bring to a study. Cresswell (2007) states that all researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers like to make explicit those values. They "admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report their values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of the information gathered from the field. We say that the "position themselves" in a study" (p.18). The issue of how researcher positionality impacts on the research process is one that sits at the heart of the literature focused on 'the doing' of research and it is one that Sikes (2004) emphasizes in stating that:

> It is important for all researchers to spend some time thinking about how they are philosophically positioned and for them to be aware of how their positioning- and the fundamental assumptions they hold – might influence their research thinking and practice. This is about being a reflexive and reflective and, therefore, a rigorous researcher who is able to present their findings and interpretations in the confidence they have thought about, acknowledged and been honest and explicit about their stance and the influence it has had upon their work. This is important given that a major criticism of much educational research is that it is biased and partisan. (p. 15)

3.1.4 Methodological Assumptions

Creswell's inclusion of the methodological considerations that underpin qualitative research alongside the ontological, epistemological and axiological considerations is significant in the context

of this research because it articulates clearly the practical realities inherent in the conduct of research that occurs in settings that may be unpredictable and at times far removed from those that are structured, orderly and predictable. He speaks of "how the procedures of qualitative research, or its methodology, are characterized as inductive, emerging and shaped by the researcher's experience in collecting the data" (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). His view that there is a possibility that the research questions may change in the middle of the study to better reflect the types of questions needed to understand the research problem is particularly prescient in terms of how this this research unfolded in the context of a remote Indigenous community in Cape York.

Research into a phenomenon as complex as the transition of children to boarding demands the ability to draw upon a research framework and subsequent choice of methodology that allows for multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations of events. A constructivist/interpretivist interpretation makes this possible and also serves to determine an appropriate choice of methodology for the research. McGregor and Murname (2010) state that:

> The word methodology comprises two nouns: method and ology, which means a branch of knowledge; hence, methodology is a branch of knowledge that deals with the general principles or axioms of the generation of new knowledge. It refers to the rationale and the philosophical assumptions that underlie any natural, social or human science study, whether articulated or not. Simply put, methodology refers to how each of logic, reality and what counts as knowledge informs research" (p. 2).

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) point to the broad use of the term to encompass the research design, methods, approaches and procedures used in an investigation which in turn determine elements of method such as techniques of data gathering, participants, instruments used and data analysis.

3.1.5 The Articulation of a Research Paradigm

In the language of qualitative research, responses to the centrality of the philosophical assumptions that underpin qualitative research will largely determine the choice of an appropriate research paradigm. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), provide a concise summary of how leaders in research have defined the meaning of the term research paradigm. They refer to Kuhn's (1962) original explanation of the term to mean a philosophical way of thinking and reference a number of other definitions that show how the meaning of the term has evolved. Lather (1986) explains that a research paradigm inherently reflects the researcher's beliefs about the world that s/he wants to live in. Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a paradigm as a basic set of beliefs or a worldview that guides research action or an investigation. Similarly, the gurus of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define paradigms as human constructions, which deal with first principles or ultimates indicating where the researcher is coming from so as to construct meaning embedded in the data. Mackenzie and

Knipe (2006) state that in educational research, the term paradigm is used to describe a researcher's 'worldview" (p.26).

The choice of an appropriate research paradigm is critical because it defines clearly the researcher's understandings about the nature of reality and the possibility that there are multiple and at times, conflicting representations or constructions of reality. In short, the choice of paradigm will delineate the researcher's ontological and epistemological positioning and thus influence directly the way in which the research will be conducted. Paradigms also serve to articulate the nature of the relationship between a researcher and those who are the participants in the research.

Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) identify four common paradigms or theoretical frameworks which serve to orient potential researchers in terms of their beliefs regarding the essential nature of knowledge, methodological choice in research and criteria for validity. They refer to the four most common paradigms as postpositivist (and positivist), interpretivist/constructivist, transformative and pragmatic.

Table 3.2

Key Research Paradigms

Paradigm	Methods (Primarily)	Data Collection Tools (Examples)
Positivist/Postpositivist	Quantitative. "Although qualitative methods can be used within this paradigm, quantitative methods tend to be predominant…" (Mertens, 2005, p. 12)	Experiments Quasi-experiments Tests Scales
Interpretivist/Constructivist	Qualitative methods although quantitative methods may also be utilised	Interviews Observations Document reviews Visual data analysis
Transformative	Qualitative methods with quantitative and mixed methods. Contextual and historical factors described, especially as they relate to oppression (Mertens, 2005, p. 9)	Diverse range of tools-particular need to avoid discrimination. eg: sexism, racism and homophobia
Pragmatic	Qualitative and/or quantitative methods may be employed. Methods are matched to the specific questions about the purpose of the research	May include tools from both positivist and interpretivist paradigms. eg: interviews, observations and testing and experiments

Source: Mackenzie and Knipe (2006, p. 5)

The paradigms outlined by Mackenzie and Knipe are commonly expressed in the literature, although there can be some variations applied to the naming of particular paradigms and some researchers have identified the need for qualitative research to be open to the development of

alternative constructions of research that allow for new possibilities in terms of the interpretation and application of the key philosophical assumptions and in the development of research methodologies. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) for example use the term 'critical' alongside the transformative paradigm, while Cresswell (2007) identifies the four key paradigms as postpositivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory and pragmatism.

Chilisa and Kawulich (2012) apply the term 'emancipatory' in conjunction with their description of the transformative paradigm and also identify a 'postcolonial Indigenous paradigm as "a world view that focuses on the shared aspects of ontology, epistemology, axiology and research methodologies of disempowered or historically oppressed social groups" (p.13).

Applying these typologies and philosophical frameworks to the question of how best to conduct research into participant perspectives of the experience of the transition from the remote Indigenous community of Lockhart River to boarding determined that the approach would be essentially interpretivist/social constructivist in nature. My goal as a researcher was to gain an understanding of the experience from the point of view of those closest to the process of the transition. "Interpretivist/constructivist approaches to research have the intention of understanding 'the world of human experience' (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 36), suggesting that 'reality is socially constructed' (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). The interpretivist/constructivist researcher tends to rely on the 'participants views of the situation being studied' (Cresswell, 2003, p. 8) and recognizes the impact on the research of their own background and experiences. Constructivists do not generally begin with a theory (as with positivists) rather they 'generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meanings throughout the research process" (Cresswell, 2003, as cited in Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 3).

3.2 Research and Indigenous Communities

In Chapter Two, reference was made to the highly problematic past linked to the practices of boarding schools and residential providers in working with Indigenous populations both in Australia and overseas. Practices built around policies of assimilation and segregation that have seen Indigenous children and their families subjected to marginalization and often systematic abuse and ill-treatment have left a mark on the current discussions around the transition to boarding that exists to the present day. In the same way, historical practices around the conduct of research which have seen Indigenous Australians as little more than subjects for study have left a legacy of distrust which demands that current research must meet the highest standards of ethical conduct. "Indigenous Australians are one of the most researched groups of people in the world. Intellectual property until recent times did not exist for Indigenous Australians and many researchers have used unethical practices when obtaining information" (Gorman & Toombs, 2009, p.4).

In articulating the importance of ensuring that modern qualitative research which involves working with Indigenous communities acknowledges the problematic legacies of previous research practices, Mander states that:

> The delineation of an ontology, epistemology and methodology are where the echoes of colonialism resonate loudest (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, 2008); the dominance of Western paradigmatic and philosophical notions are overlooked (Moreton-Robinson and Walter,2009); the marginalization of culturally valued knowledge takes place (Nakata, 2002, 2007); and historically where the subjugation to an imposed process has begun for many Aboriginal peoples. (Fielder et al., 2000, as cited in Mander, 2012, p. 86)

Denzin et al. (2008) argue that decolonizing research practices must be implemented when working in cross-cultural situations with marginalized populations and state that "culturally responsive research practices must be developed" (p.6). They argue that the focus of power in cross-cultural settings must work to locate power within the Indigenous community and encourage self-determination and empowerment. Saunders et al. (2010) speak of the need for newer approaches to qualitative research to consider issues such as the redistribution of power in research relationships arguing that "approaches such as biography, phenomenology and ethnography have attempted to shift the power relationship within research by minimizing the distance and separation in the researcher-participant relationship" (p.5).

Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) and Chilisa (2012) argue that contemporary research in the cross-cultural space, especially where legacies of colonialism and subsequent disempowerment are strongly felt, must be mindful of the need to develop and implement research techniques which include processes of:

> decolonizing the conventional interview technique, using interview methods such as talking circles and invoking indigenous knowledge to inform alternative research methods compatible with the worldviews of the colonized 'Other.' In the conduct of their work, researchers should pay due recognition to Indigenous people who have knowledge and expertise and "Indigenous knowledge to guide interview question structures, types of questions asked and data analysis procedures". (Chilisa, 2012, p. 223)

The social constructivist/interpretivist theoretical framework is not uncommon in the area of Aboriginal education. For example, in their research into perceptions of schooling from rural Aboriginal youth who were at risk of entering the juvenile justice system, Edwards-Groves and Murray (2008), worked from a social constructivist orientation to elicit how identities as social constructions influenced Aboriginal youths' experiences of school. They argue that "participant perspectives illustrate the value of understanding the classroom as social sites, and how experiences across contexts mutually act on and interact with each other in the formation of self; that is, the social

construction of the individual hinges on the social peculiarities experienced in different social contexts" (Edwards-Groves & Murray, 2008, p. 166). Nelson and Hay (2010) and Kingsley et al. (2010) have also worked from a social constructivist orientation in their research with Indigenous Australians, arguing that such an orientation is supportive of research that focuses on understanding a phenomenon – such as transition experience – and how humans view the phenomenon.

The travel of Lockhart River children to and from boarding provides an example of why it was important in the context of this research to work from a theoretical perspective that would prioritise the perspective and voice of the participants and thus allow for a construction of reality to emerge that could challenge a singular interpretation of events.

At the airport in Lockhart River and in a number of other remote Indigenous communities, I have seen children refuse to board a small plane that has been chartered for the purpose of getting them to Cairns and back to school. This refusal can be acted out in silence or it can be accompanied by tears as parents and guardians, often with the support of Transition Support Service staff, attempt to get their child on to the plane. When the child 'bails up' and refuses to board, they are marked as a 'no show' and the boarding provider may or may not rebook travel at a later time. The failure to board can be interpreted, especially through the eyes of non-Indigenous school staff as school refusal. That is, the child does not want to go to school and take advantage of the wonderful opportunities that boarding provides. The failure of parents or guardians to get their child on the plane can be interpreted by the boarding provider as reflective of a lack of interest in, or a commitment to education.

In reality, it may be that the child is fearful of flying in small planes. The reality may well be that the act of not boarding has nothing to do with not wanting to attend school but is a reflection of anxiety around travelling in small planes, separation anxiety or a painful memory of something that may have previously happened in boarding. On the part of parents and guardians in Lockhart River, there lives the memory of a 2005 plane crash in poor visibility near the airport that claimed 15 lives. A plane crash in early 2020 on the beach close to Lockhart River claimed five lives and served to further heighten a fear of small planes in the bad weather that so often comes with the Wet Season. Indeed, a child may desperately want to return to a boarding school or residential facility. They may place a very high value on the opportunities created by accessing a boarding school education. They may, however, not be able to manage the anxiety and fear that come with a sense of separation and flying in the bad weather that invariably comes with the Wet Season in Lockhart River.

It is clear that the interpretation and articulation of the complex array of experiences that make up the totality of the transition experience, by those directly involved, served to exercise a powerful influence on the choice of methodology for this research.

3.3 "Going Inside the Experience": Phenomenology

The key purpose of this research is to provide an articulation of the lived experience of the transition to boarding for a group of students, parents and guardians and community members from Lockhart River community to secondary boarding schools and residential facilities. The focus is on prioritizing community voice of the experience of transition prior to students leaving community for the first time, at the end of their first semester away and at the end of their first complete year in secondary school away from home. In attempting to give voice to participant perspectives on the experience of the transition from remote Indigenous community, it is clear that the proposed research is qualitative in nature with a very strong orientation to phenomenological methods of enquiry. The desire to go give voice to the participants in the process; students, families, school and support staff is consistent with Merriam's view that "research focused on discovery, insight and understanding from the perspective of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (1998, p.1).

At the heart of phenomenological research is the desire to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon under review. A researcher applying phenomenological methods of enquiry is primarily concerned with the lived experience of the people who are involved in the issue or phenomena which is the subject of the research. The focus on describing the lived experience is a recurring theme in the literature, and Lester (1999) speaks of how the purpose of the phenomenological orientation and approach is to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. Phenomenological approaches are "powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions and cutting through the clutter of taken-for granted assumptions and conventional wisdom" (p.1). In assessing the role that that the approach can make to improving outcomes in inclusive education Bourke (2007) writes that "phenomenological studies in education have the capacity to make a valuable contribution in areas where policy makers and practitioners need information on which to base their decisions about reform of education which have the capacity to include all students" (p.14). McGrath and Phillips state that the phenomenological process "is inductive and descriptive and seeks to record experiences from the point of view of the individual who had them without imposing a specific theoretical or conceptual framework on the study prior to collecting data" (2008, p.23). They argue that in the context of their work as health professionals working with Indigenous populations in remote Australia that "such an approach to analysis provided the cultural safeguard that the findings would be driven by the participants' insights rather than mediated by the researchers" (p.23).

In the context of this research, which grew out of direct personal and professional experience of what I perceived to be an abuse of power in how a boarding school excluded a cohort of remote Indigenous students, a phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate. In their research involving Australian disengaged secondary school-aged youth, Lewthwaite et al. (2017) employed a

phenomenological research methodology in order to gain a deep understanding of personal perspective and interpretations of the lived experience of participants and also to:

> inform and, potentially challenge practice and policy, which also fits with a phenomenological research orientation. As stated by Lester (1999), phenomenology is often used in a contexts in which participants' voice is used to inform, challenge and adjust policy, and by doing so, provide a vehicle for participant agency contributing to enacted change. (p. 4)

They argue further that phenomenological approaches have a key role to play in spaces where dominant discourses are framed in terms of deficit and/or blame. In the context of the transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students, issues around retention and engagement in a Western education have traditionally been framed in terms of the failure of students and their families and communities to fit in or adjust to what is required. That is, the 'problems' reside in the individual student and their family or community situation. A phenomenological approach to 'unpacking' the experience of the transition from the perspective of the participants allows for a different reality to emerge. That reality may indicate that the deficit rests with the boarding school or residential facility or with the Western bureaucratic systems that should function to facilitate the access of Indigenous students to a quality, comprehensive secondary education.

Further to this, it is clear that phenomenological research methods have a particular relevance to research that involves working with Indigenous communities and:

> Researchers conducting phenomenological studies among Indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada have identified a seamless link between phenomenology and indigenous oral tradition. Phenomenology is compatible with indigenous peoples because it is synchronous with holistic cultural lifeway and values. Phenomenology, as a research method, assists indigenous people in reproducing, through narrative communication, features of the past, present and future. (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005, p.1264)

Jenkins (2012) used phenomenological methods of inquiry to investigate the lived experience of Aboriginal adults from remote Western Australian communities who, as children, had left their homes to attend schools, while Dionne (2008) is one of a number of researchers who have investigated the impact on Indigenous populations of the residential school system in Canada using a similar methodological framework.

3.4 Author Positionality: 'Insider/Outsider' Status

In Chapter One, the key motivating factors behind the conduct of this research were outlined through recounting my work as a Program Manager with the Australian Government. My workplace involvement with a boarding school that had excluded a group of remote Indigenous boarding students

because they appeared to be ‘in the wrong place at the wrong time’ or had become an embarrassing administrative problem demanded a strong degree of reflection on the events I both observed and was required to report on. I saw the exclusion of the students as unwarranted and in sharp contradiction to my personal views regarding social justice.

At the same time, I had started to engage in a series of discussions with parents, guardians and community members in Lockhart River around structured support for enhancing the quality of the community’s engagement with education. Through reflections on the nature of these discussions and a number of individual conversations with parents and guardians, it became clear that the transition to boarding environment was, for a significant number of community members, one in which their voices were often not heard.

In writing of her experiences in conducting research around the transition to boarding for Aboriginal students, their families and wider communities in central Australia, Benveniste (2018, p.120) writes that: “Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be a contested space for a non-Aboriginal researcher (Guenther et al., 2015) however, productive dialogue with collaborative partnerships between researchers and communities can be achieved (Chilisa, 2012)”. In Chapter One I described the relationship I had built with the Lockhart River community well prior to the conduct of the research

My frequent visits to Lockhart River in the period between 2009 and 2012 gave me an opportunity to become familiar with the work of the Puuya Foundation which exists to support the development of community capacity-building initiatives and which has a very strong focus on improving education outcomes for the children of Lockhart River. Indeed, as I worked to articulate a culturally appropriate and community-driven research proposal, Denise Hagan, CEO of the Puuya Foundation and other Foundation members strongly encouraged me to work with the community, utilizing the guidance they could provide for the research and provide a meaningful degree of community feedback. The foundation expressed support for the proposed research and representatives, who include members of the Lockhart River Council, were familiar with the nature and intent of the proposed research. Early discussions suggested the use of Lockhart River Learning Circles as a possible mechanism for elements of data collection and as a safe and culturally appropriate mechanism for providing constant and regular feedback to community.

Prior to submission of the ethics application, letters of support were provided by both the Puuya Foundation and the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council (Appendix B and Appendix C). The letters articulate the extent to which the conduct of the research had been discussed at length through the Lockhart River Learning Circles conducted by the Puuya Foundation in stating that:

> We are aware that the proposed research aims to give students, parents, families and community members the opportunity to talk about the transition to boarding school and to

> explain what happens from a community perspective. We are keen to see that the community members have a say in the secondary education of their children and believe that the proposed research will allow this to happen. (Puuya Foundation Letter of Support, 2014)

It is also important to emphasize that I have been engaged in a number of professional experiences during the conduct of this research. Working as the Manager of AFL Cape York House in Cairns, Head of Boarding in Wadeye Community and Manager of the Transition Support Service, demanded and still demand an immersion into and engagement with the transition space in a capacity altogether different from that of the researcher.

In the shaping and reflecting on the understanding of the nature of beliefs about reality that I as researcher bring to this research on how individuals experience the transition to school away from community, I come from the view that there can be no single experience of reality: it exists very much as a social construct. Reality and the experience of reality are not fixed and are constructed from multiple sources of experience.

3.5 Ethical Issues

Approval for the research to proceed was sought in accordance with all relevant research protocols mandated by James Cook University. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) statement 'Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research' and the 'Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies 2012' produced by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) provided fundamental guidance in ensuring that all parts of the research process were bounded by the highest standards of ethical practice. These guidelines were revised by the NHMRC in 2018 with the publication of the document 'Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders.'

The AIATSIS Guidelines are underpinned by 14 key principles which state explicitly the behaviors expected of researchers in terms of rights, respect and recognition; negotiation, consultation, agreement and mutual understanding; participation, collaboration and partnership; benefits, outcomes and giving back; managing research: use storage and access; and reporting and compliance. The guidelines state clearly that, "it is essential that Indigenous people are full participants in the research projects that concern them, share an understanding of the aims and methods of the research, and share the results of this work. At every stage, research about Indigenous peoples must be founded on a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and Indigenous people" (AIATSIS, 2012, p.1).

While of particular utility in the context of health research, the NHMRC guidelines provide a level of detail that should be understood and considered by any researcher engaging in work with Indigenous Australians and their communities. The current (2018) guidelines reflect a process of

ongoing consultation with Indigenous communities and are built around adherence to six key values: spirit and integrity, reciprocity, respect, equity, cultural continuity and responsibility (NHMRC, 2018, p.3).

In terms of the conduct of this research, it is important to state that fidelity to both the intent and the letter of the guidelines promulgated by James Cook University and organizations such as the NHMRC and AIATSIS was assured through a series of consultative processes which ensured that the conduct of the research was consistent with the collaborative approach so necessary when working in cross-cultural situations. As mentioned previously, prior to submission of the ethics application, letters of support were provided by both the Puuya Foundation and the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council.

Human Research Ethics Committee approval (Ethics Approval Number H5694) for the research was granted on October 7th 2014. The research was labelled as Category 3 with "the potential to cause mild psychological distress or physical stress. Minor deviation from frank disclosure of the research may be involved."

3.5.1 Informed Consent

The support provided by community members in the discussions leading up to the conduct of the research ensured that careful consideration was given to of one of the key ethical issues inherent in the research, namely that of ensuring that the concept of informed consent for participants was be dealt with in a manner which was respectful of the cross-cultural nature of the research, the age of the students participating in the research and, where appropriate, the fluency of adult participants in Standard Australian English (SAE). McGrath and Phillips state that the key issues inherent in "considerations pertaining to the giving of informed consent by and on behalf of Indigenous Australians have not been comprehensively explored; to the contrary, these issues have scarcely been considered in the literature to date" (2008, p.21).

Living and working in remote Indigenous communities, especially with children and families involved in the transition to boarding, I have witnessed many instances of written consent being sought in circumstances where it was abundantly clear that the person being asked to provide the consent was being placed in a position where the notion of consent as "informed" was highly problematic. In seeking consent to engage participants in the conduct of this research I was acutely aware of those occasions in which there existed significant disparities in power between me as a researcher and between some of those with whom I sought to engage. The community discussions that took place in the Learning Circles ensured that all adult participants in the research were able to engage in the research with a clear understanding of what their participation would involve for them and for the children in their care.

That said, I experienced a distinct sense of unease at presenting a number of parents and guardians with consent forms to sign, even after the discussions that had occurred previously.

3.6 The Conduct of the Research

The research was conducted in the community of Lockhart River over a period from November 2015 to December 2016. Interviews were conducted on three separate occasions; January 2016, July 2016 and in December 2016.

Prior to the first round of interviews in January 2016, two preliminary visits to the community were made in October-November 2015 and early December 2015. These visits were conducted in order to further build rapport with potential participants in the research and to obtain the required consent in a manner consistent with best practice in research for remote Indigenous communities.

These preliminary visits were important for a number of reasons. The October visit was the first opportunity I had to drive into the community from Cairns and gain a full appreciation of the degree of remoteness that warrants Lockhart River being classed as 'very remote' in terms of the Australian Bureau of Statistics classification index. While I had visited the community on many occasions prior to October 2015, these visits had all been made by air. The drive from Cairns to Lockhart River takes anywhere from 11 to 14 hours depending on the condition of the road. In October, before the Wet Season arrives, the road condition makes access possible but quite demanding in terms of time and effort. When the Wet Season arrives, Lockhart River becomes inaccessible by road as the rivers rise and the road becomes impassable for months. The July 2016 interviews were also conducted after a journey in from Cairns by road. The reality of Lockhart River's remoteness was made a clear reality as a consequence of driving in.

It is important to restate here the centrality of remoteness as a key element that underpins this research. There is no comparison to be made between the transition to boarding for a Year 6 student from a remote community such as Lockhart River and the transition for a student from regional Victorian or Western Australian town: to suggest such and generate the concept of a 'generic' Indigenous student in the transition context is to misrepresent the complexity of the transition space.

The visits made in 2015 also provided me with the opportunity to observe the Year 6 class as they finished their final year of education in Lockhart River and finalized preparations for the transition to boarding school which would occur in January 2016. I had the opportunity to attend the Year 6 graduation from Lockhart River State School in December 2015 where the community gathered to celebrate this important milestone in the education journey of their children. As students were presented with their graduation certificates and gifts, the names of their 2016 secondary schools were read out. The sense of pride evident in the students, parents and guardians who were to make the transition was evident. It was also a sobering reminder that not all students who received a graduation gift had managed to secure a place in a boarding school or residential facility. When these students

came forward to receive their primary school graduation certificate and gift, I felt a palpable sense of awkwardness on their part and on the part of most of those assembled for this important milestone occasion.

The visits allowed me to continue to further develop a rapport with students, parents and guardians and community members which would facilitate a more natural interaction for the upcoming interviews. It was important for me to ensure that the conduct of the research would be seen by community as growing from a relationship that had built up over a number of years. Jalla and Hayden argue that trust and relationships are essential prerequisites for the conduct of successful research. “In Aboriginal culture, the overarching glue of life, work and community is relationships. Before commencing any research, it is essential to build trust and relationships with the community” (2014, p.1).

3.7 Research Participants

All participants in the research process were residents of Lockhart River community who had either lived in the community all their lives or for substantial periods of time. The initial impetus for the participation of community members came from informal discussions held in community as part of my work for the Australian government in 2011-2012. As the formal conduct of the research took shape, the proposal was discussed through Puuya Learning Circle meetings and minutes of those meetings reflect those discussions and the desire of a number of community members to support the conduct of the research. Participation in the research was voluntary.

3.7.1 Student Participants in the Research

A total of eight Year 6 students who were going to a boarding school or residential facility at the start of 2016 participated in the research with the permission of parents and guardians. The students comprised half of the cohort that made the transition from community to boarding school in January 2016. A number of the students were encouraged to participate in the research by parents or adult relatives who had been engaged in the earlier discussions that had occurred as part of the Learning Circles.

A further four students who were currently enrolled in boarding school participated in the student interviews on the advice of community members who were of the view that younger students would be far more comfortable in speaking about their anticipated or actual experiences of boarding school in the company of other students who had previously made the transition. The participation of these older students was a response to the reality of doing research in the field, in this case in the Lockhart River context where I was acutely conscious of the need to engage respectfully with community members who had agreed to support the conduct of the research. They were clearly of the view that the richest conversations would be fostered in group contexts where clarifying comments and questions could be communicated across the language divide. It must be stated again that, for

some participants in the research, facility in Standard Australian English (SAE) could not be taken for granted.

3.7.2 Adult Participants in the Research

A total of twelve adults, all of whom had children currently in boarding school, preparing to transition at the start of 2016 or had previous experience of children transitioning to boarding school participated in the interviews. Given that the research had been discussed at Lockhart River Learning Circles where a broad range of community members including community leaders had been present, there was a strong desire for the research to provide a mechanism by which the views of community on what was regarded as an issue of considerable significance could be expressed. The participation of a range of community members was characterized by a genuine desire to articulate what the experience meant for them at a personal level and to articulate the importance for the broader Lockhart River community of 'having a say' on an issue in which many community members had previously felt marginalized and disempowered, especially when it came to the exclusion of children without any consultation with family.

3.8 Data Collection

The single most important data collection method used in this research was the interview, which in its desired relational and conversational style was conducted using semi-structured or unstructured interactions. Yin (2011) states that in qualitative research it is highly likely that the qualitative interview will be the dominant mode of data collection, and in this study it was carried out using open-ended rather than closed-ended questions.

Given the importance of ensuring that participants could engage in the research in an environment that put them at ease, it was important that the style, structure and setting for the interviews be flexible and appropriate. As mentioned previously representatives of the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and the Puuya Foundation played a key role to play in providing advice regarding the style and setting of interviews with student and adult participants. Chilisa (2012) states that in the conduct of their work, researchers should pay due recognition to Indigenous people who have knowledge and expertise and "Indigenous knowledge to guide interview question structures, types of questions asked and data analysis procedures" (p.223).

A number of interviews with students were conducted in small group situations using a semi-structured interview format which will allowed for key issues to be explored in a manner which facilitated discussion and allowed for the perspectives students to be aired in a more natural setting. In their research with Aboriginal boys at risk of entering the juvenile justice system, Edwards-Groves and Murray (2008) found that the use of focus group interviews and having informal discussions with groups of boys was an important way not to single out individual students, "something about which Aboriginal students are reported to be particularly sensitive about" (p.167).

The interviews with parents and guardians and community members were guided through a process of collaboration based on extensive consultations with community members. The use of the Learning Circle format was well-established in Lockhart River and seen as a non-threatening and culturally appropriate way of facilitating discussion and gathering information. However, the opportunity for individual interviews to occur was provided in order for a full range of participant perspectives to emerge from the research process.

Interviews were conducted in the 'transition room' at the school, at the Kuuchi Kaana Centre, at the community hall, outside the community store, on the verandahs of resident's homes and on the verandah of the community library which doubled as a coffee shop where reengaging students worked with a teacher to learn basic skills in hospitality. Community members were very firm in their view that both students and adults would be far more comfortable in less formal settings and in group settings where a more conversational style would generate discussion and encourage less confident study participants to engage meaningfully in discussions about the transition away from Lockhart River for secondary school.

It was made clear to me at the beginning of the research process in January 2016 with the conduct of the first interviews prior to students leaving community that a number of adult participants were not comfortable with interview conversations being voice recorded. While the tape recording of interviews was included on the consent forms completed by adult participants, there was a clear reluctance on the part of some adult participants regarding the use of the voice recorder. As a consequence, all interviews were documented solely through the taking of notes as the conversations unfolded. The taking of notes manually ensured that I was able to provide immediate feedback to participants and at the end of each interview time the key elements of our conversations were read back to ensure that they had been recorded accurately and were a true reflection of what had been said. This was of particular importance when the interviews were conducted in a group setting and all interview participants expressed satisfaction with this process.

3.9 Data Analysis

Punch (2009) states that:

> There is no single right way to do qualitative data analysis-no single methodological framework. Much depends on the purposes of the research, and it is important that the proposed method of analysis is carefully considered in planning the research, and is integrated from the start with other parts of the research, rather than being an afterthought. (p.171)

What is common to qualitative approaches to research is that data collection and analysis is a "*simultaneous* activity in qualitative research. Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read. It is an interactive and inductive process throughout which allows the investigator to produce believable and trustworthy findings" (Merriam, 1998, p.152).

The nature of the research, its methodological framework, method of data collection and data sources exerted a strong influence over the choices made by which data was be analyzed and then presented. The use of a variety of interview types; unstructured and semi-structured, and the selection of a range participants; students, their parents and care-givers and community members, allowed for a full range of participant perspectives and experiences that could legitimately represent the transition experience to be gathered and then analyzed.

Given the constructivist/interpretivist orientation of the research it was appropriate that methods of data analysis allowed for the richness and diversity of the transition experience to be fully expressed. Consequently, the analytical framework proposed here is that of inductive analysis, an approach which allows for research findings to "emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2006, p.238). Thomas states that inductive approaches to data analysis are theory generating as opposed to theory testing and are intended to clarify the data reduction process by describing a set of procedures for creating meaning in complex data through the development of summary themes or categories from the raw data (p.239).

In order to create meaning from the data drawn from the interviews in Lockhart River the six-phase process of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. They state that thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (p.6). The use of thematic analysis in this context is congruent with the data analysis procedures used by Mander (2012) and Benveniste (2018) in their research into boarding and Indigenous students.

Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017) write that thematic analysis "offers a more accessible form of analysis, particularly for those early in their research career" and that "it is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences and generating unanticipated insights" (p.2). In the context of this research, and consistent with the view that the goal of this research is to enable community voice about the experience of the transition to boarding and not provide a vehicle for the articulation of the researcher's view of what he thinks the transition experience is about, the notion of 'unanticipated insights is particularly prescient. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) state that a good thematic analysis does more than simply summarise the data. "A good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of it. A common pitfall is to use the main interview question as the themes Typically, this reflects the fact that the data have been summarised and organized rather than analysed" (p.3353).

The six phase process for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke is summarized by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) as follows:

- Become familiar with the data.

- Generate initial codes (use ‘open coding’).
- Search for themes.
- Review themes.
- Define themes.
- Writing up.

In the context of this research and in keeping with the intent of a phenomenological research methodology it was essential that, from the outset I do two things:

- ‘Immerse’ myself in the data. That is read, re-read and re-read. What Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as reading the data in an *active* way-searching form meanings, patterns and so on before coding (p. 16).
- ‘Bracket’ my own assumptions based on extensive previous experience in the transition and actually allow the words of participants to emerge so as to create and allow for the articulation their meaning of the transition experience. In the conduct of this research and the analysis of interview data I was acutely conscious of McGrath and Phillips’(2008) assertion that the process (of phenomenological research) is “inductive and descriptive and seeks to record experiences from the viewpoint of the individual who had them without imposing a specific theoretical or conceptual framework on the study prior to collecting data. Such an approach to analysis provided the cultural safeguard that the findings would be driven by the participants’ insights rather than mediated by researchers” (p. 23).

It is important to note that the sequencing of this research allowed for participants to be provided with feedback in a way that ensured I had accurately captured what had been discussed during the interviews. The responses obtained during the January 2016 interviews were shared with participants when I returned to the community for the second round of interviews in July 2016 and the interview material gathered in the July visit was similarly discussed as part of the final phase of data collection in community in December 2016. I returned to Lockhart River in 2017 and again, had the opportunity to meet with participants and discuss the interviews which had been conducted in the previous December.

3.10 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the philosophical and methodological considerations that underpinned this research and which guided the methods chosen to collect and analyse data. I have stated why a social constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm that embraces a phenomenological methodology was appropriate for this research, given the view that research into a phenomena such as the transition to boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities must allow for and embrace multiple meanings of and interpretations of reality that are couched in individual experience and which may emanate from a distinctive cultural lens. I have articulated how the research described,

both in terms of intent and methodology, is consistent with contemporary best practice in qualitative research in cross-cultural settings where the legacies of colonialism and the concomitant dominance of Western epistemologies have cast a shadow over research and Indigenous people generally and in the Australian context in particular.

In the chapters that follow I will present the research findings which provide a detailed thematic coverage of the data collected from the interviews with participants. Chapter 4 reveals the complexity of the transition experience for all involved in the period prior to, during and after the first year of transition to boarding schools and residential facilities while Chapter 5 articulates from the perspectives of both children and adults the complex and interrelated set of factors that make for what community regards as a successful transition to boarding.

Chapter 4: Research Findings Part 1

4.0 Introduction to Research Question 1 (A): How Do the Children Who Are About to Experience the Transition View the Prospects of Going to a Boarding School or Residential Facility?

The specifics of the research methodology and subsequent choice of research methods were covered in detail in Chapter 3. In the following two chapters, the data gathered during the visits to the community in January, July and December 2016 are presented. The first series of interviews were conducted just prior to students leaving the community to begin their secondary education and subsequent interviews were held in July when students had returned to community at the end of Semester One with the final interviews held when students had completed their first year of secondary school.

This chapter focuses on how the community, children and adults anticipated the experience of going away to school and then focuses on how children and adults actually experienced the reality of the transition to boarding during the course of 2016. As stated in Chapter 3 it is important to note in advance of the data presentation that the data cannot be totally isolated from community members' everyday life experiences prior to and during the conduct of the interviews. As we spoke, both children and adults would often reference what was happening around them at the time, especially with respect to issues such as the behavior of secondary school aged children in community and a series of ongoing disputes which often escalated into community in-fighting. It is clear that what was happening in community had an impact on the data gathering process and certainly worked to exert an influence on how both children and adults responded to discussions around how the prospects of transition and the experience were viewed.

4.1 Nervous Anticipation of What Lies Ahead

The prospect of transitioning from Lockhart River to start their secondary education such a long way from home elicited a variety of responses from student participants. One transitioning student articulated clearly the mix of nervousness and anticipation in stating simply: "I'm a bit nervous you know but also a bit excited too." (Year 6/7 Student 2)

Given the 'normalization' of the transition experience for most Lockhart River children at the end of their primary schooling, most had formed a view of what the transition would be like based on three key factors:

- the prospect of transitioning into a boarding school or residential facility in the company of other Lockhart River students.
- their conversations with older students who had been away to boarding or who were currently in boarding school with the retelling of their transition experiences.

- their reactions, responses to and feelings about the orientation visits that were conducted to boarding schools and residential facilities as a part of the enrolment and pre-transition process.

Each of these factors will now be discussed in turn.

4.1.1 The Importance of Not Going Alone

Of the students who participated in the research, only one was to attend a school where there were no other Lockhart River students. It became clear very early in the conduct of the research that much of the apparent anxiety experienced by most Year 6 students around the prospect of transitioning to education well away from Lockhart River was tempered in large part by the knowledge that they would not be alone at a time of greatly heightened vulnerability. This is a point commonly referred to in the literature around primary to secondary transition generally and was a feeling clearly expressed as follows:

> I feel, OK, just a bit nervous. But it's good because other boys are coming with me and I know some of the older boys who are coming back with us. They talk to us a lot about what we have to do. Some of those boys have been going there for three of four years now. (Year 6/7 Student 1)

It was a point made in nearly all of the discussions with students. Their levels of confidence regarding the prospect of leaving Lockhart River were shaped by the knowledge that they would have the security of other, often older students in their new environment. One participant stated that:

> Nearly all our class this year are going to boarding school. I think only two people are staying here. We know older students who went away last year and some older boys and girls they got to graduate last year. When we went for our visit last year we met (Older Students). They said that they will look after us this year. (Year 6/7 Student 3)

A common response that reinforces the importance of being in the company of other Lockhart River students during the transition was succinctly expressed by one participant who stated that:

> I'm a bit nervous about making new friends. The boarding school is really big…..much bigger than here you know. We've got maybe one hundred kids here in Lockhart. In that school they've got maybe 600 or so. But as long as we got other Lockhart River kids there we should be OK. (Year 6/7 Student 4)

The notion of safety in numbers is one that provides a significant degree of reassurance to students, but as will be explained in the discussion of parent and guardian responses, the presence of large numbers of students from a single community in a particular school can be regarded as potentially problematic. For students from the 2016 cohort who were going into boarding placements where they were to be the only students from Lockhart River, the prospect was daunting:

> The school is really big and I don't know anyone who goes there……but I met some of the other boys who live there from other communities when we went down for interview. They said they will be my friends and look after me so that's OK. (Year 6/7 Student 2)

For another student who had not gained a placement in a boarding school where a number of his peers were going, the enrolment interview visit he had done in late 2015 provided a degree of reassurance that was expressed by his guardian:

> I went with him for the interview. It was a good visit. He made a friend from (Another Cape York community) and we stayed at the same motel. I will be really worried for him…..but I saw lots of other boys. They aren't scared so I told him not to be scared. As long as he's got a friend or can make friends he'll be OK. (Parent/Guardian 5)

It was certainly very clear in this anticipatory phase of the transition that those students who felt the greatest degree of confidence about what lay ahead were those who would be accompanied by other students from their age and peer group or who knew that were older Lockhart River students to whom they could turn when difficulties arose.

4.1.2 Blazing the Trail and Managing Homesickness: "The Older Kids Tell Us….."

From the outset it became clear that the Lockhart River Year 6 students had heard a great deal about life in boarding school from friends, older brothers and sisters and other family members who had previously made the transition. The normalization of transition at the end of primary school in Lockhart River is an important factor here. Despite the apparently high rates of disengagement from boarding at various year levels that have at time characterized individual, family and community experiences of engagement with the transition to boarding school, younger students were more inclined to speak in positive terms about the prospect of what lay ahead because of what they had heard from older students who were at various stages of their education well away from Lockhart River. The following comment by a transitioning student captures a view held by a number of other students about the importance of the presence of older students from community:

> We saw the older boy when we went there for our visit with the Transition ladies. They tell us that they were nervous too before they went away. It's good we've got those other boys there. All of the older boys who go to that school, they've got lots of friends. (Year 6/7 Student 4)

As mentioned previously, it was on the advice of Lockhart River adults who were supporting the conduct of the research that I include some of the older students who had made the transition in the discussions with Year 6 students, especially in the period just prior to the start of Term One 2016. Their participation in a number of the discussions gave some of the younger students a degree of confidence in responding to questions around the anticipation of what lay ahead, especially in terms of what were perceived by Year 6 students as potential barriers or difficulties that created a very real

sense of anxiety. Chief among these were homesickness and concomitant anxiety around separation from family and friends, the prospect of strict routines and adherence to rules and the difficulties of managing school work that would be much harder than it was in Lockhart River.

One of the older students attempted to put the younger students at ease when the question about the things that most worried Year 6 students about the transition was asked. He said:

> Look, you always feel really nervous, even scared when you start at a new school. But it's easier to make friends when you get out and do things. You only get more homesick if you get too sad or keep ringing home. You play sport or go on excursions. But yeah, it's always easier if there are older boys from home in your school. Yeah, it was easier for me because I had a cousin there who was a senior. He was really good and he helped me to settle down. (Older Student 1)

The importance of the presence of older relatives or siblings in a new school in easing the nervousness and anxiety often associated with the transition was articulated simply and concisely as follows:

> We saw my sister when we went for the orientation visit and I got to meet with some of her friends in the boarding house. They were really nice. Really friendly and they said they would look after me and all the younger girls from other communities. I don't want to go by myself. (Year 6/7 Student 6)

This view reflected that expressed by a number of other transitioning students for whom the presence of older Lockhart River students, especially relatives, provided a degree of reassurance that they would have someone to turn to, a 'friendly face' during the critical settling in period early in the transition. The chance to connect with some of these older students during orientation and interview visits was particularly appreciated in the minds of some very nervous younger students.

4.1.3 The Importance of Pre-transition Activities

The importance of pre-transition activities, especially positive orientation visits in creating a positive sense of anticipation cannot be overstated in the minds of both student and adult participants. For students who were new to the experience of living and studying away from home for the first time it was clear that the impressions formed during orientation visits were critical in shaping a sense of positive anticipation.

All students were keen to speak at length about the visits they had made to boarding schools and residential facilities in 2015, either as part of the school trips undertaken by Lockhart River State School or for their interview/orientation travel as part of the boarding enrolment process. In explaining the mixed feelings and emotions that are part of the lead up to transitioning, one student put it thus:

> I'm a bit sad at going away and a bit nervous too, but I'm also excited. We went to visit our school and it was really good. The school is really big and no boys (laughter), only girls go that school. (Year 6/7 Student 6)

It certainly appeared that during the course of their interview/orientation visits, students developed a very positive view of what their new living and learning environment would be like and they were keen to share their impressions:

> We got to go to our new school and it was really good. We went with the Transition ladies and our parents. They helped us. They showed us our classrooms and dorms and the dining room. We met other girls from Aurukun and Kowanyama and Pormpuraaw who are going to boarding school too. They said we'll be friends when we get to school. (Year 6/7 Student 7)

The visits certainly shaped in the minds of students the view that they were moving to a very different world to that of Lockhart River, especially in terms of how they would have to quickly adapt to a whole new series of rules and regulations about everything from staying in class to doing homework and assignments and wearing school uniforms that consisted of more than a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. Student responses to questions around how they would cope with such a very different school environment were both candid and varied:

> Well it's going to be really strict there. Not like here. The older boys said that and so did the teachers when we went to that school. They said you can't just get up and walk around and if you muck up you get a detention. I hope they don't get too strict. But the boys said you get used to it and they said it gets easier when you've been there for a while. (Year 6/7 Student 3)

Students were certainly clear that significant adjustments would be required when the transition became a reality. Visiting their future schools certainly provided the Year 6 students with a set of experiences that, while short, served an important function in shaping their construction of what life would look like for them in their 2016 school settings. None of the Year 6 students interviewed believed that the challenges in adapting to new routines would be beyond them and there was a clear acceptance of what they would be required to do:

> We saw all the new uniforms. We have to wear proper uniforms. We have to wear a hat and we get different uniforms. We have to be on time to get to class and get to eat our meals. They have lots of rules and they talked to us about the rules and being on time. They also said we have to keep our dorms tidy and do our jobs before we go shopping on Saturday. If we break the rules we can't go shopping. (Year 6/7 Student 7)

The prospect of a strictly regimented learning and residential environment did not seem to unduly worry students and they were very keen to talk about how important it had been to have an experience, albeit brief, of their new schools. Of course, a visit to a new school is vastly different to

going there full-time and it is clear from the generally high (but largely undocumented) rates of disengagement in the first year away from home, that the multiple adjustments required of students in the transition to boarding are highly problematic and challenging for Year 7 students.

> Well, I think that if we've got friends we'll be OK. Yeah, we have to learn all the new rules and it's going to be much stricter than here in Lockhart. In that new school you have to go to school every day and go to class on time. You get into big trouble if you don't go to class. (Year 6/7 Student 4)

The views expressed by students, both those in Year 6 and those who had made the transition in previous years, speak in stark terms to community perceptions around the quality of the education experience in Lockhart River. Going to school every day, staying in class all day and wearing a formal uniform every day are not the norm, hence the responses by transitioning students that they would have to get used to a system that demands something very different to what they had experienced in their primary school.

> When we went to visit our new school, everyone was in the same uniform and students had to wear hats and ties. But that's OK. Everyone looks real smart in their uniform. We got to watch some after school sport too where we saw kids from our community training or playing. They all had proper sports uniform on. When I play sport I want to have that uniform too. (Year 6/7 Student 1)

The visits were important in shaping a view in the minds of students that the transition would provide a range of opportunities and experiences that simply did not exist in Lockhart River. The visits also provided a possibly reassuring glimpse to students that not all aspects of boarding life were a world removed from that of Lockhart River. As one student recounted with a broad grin on her face: "Well, two white girls had a fight in the classroom when we were there" (Year 6/7 Student 7).

When asked what she thought about witnessing such an event during her orientation visit, this student simply shrugged and added no further comment. She appeared to have been taken aback by what she had seen and expressed her observations of this event with a mixture of surprise and amusement.

4.2 Opportunity: "It's a Bit Slack Here Sometimes You Know"

All of the year six students were well aware of the very significant differences between the nature of schooling in Lockhart River and what would lie ahead for them in the boarding schools and residential facilities that they would be attending in 2016. Their understanding here was based around the work done in class with their Year 6 teacher and staff from the Transition Support Service, their interactions and conversations with older students already in boarding and from the visits they had made to boarding schools as part of the interview/enrolment process and the Year 6 camp to Brisbane.

There were some significant and at times amusing differences in how some of these opportunities that came with moving away from Lockhart River were perceived by boys and girls. Lockhart River boys love their sport, in particular their Rugby League and their horses. There are a number of horses that roam Lockhart River and surrounds and it is not uncommon to see boys of varying ages and abilities riding these horses on the outskirts of the community and down at the beach. The orientation visit to his chosen boarding school elicited the following response to a question about what he was most looking forward to at boarding school:

> They (school staff and older students) told us you get to play a lot of sports there. Sometimes the sports here are really slack for kids you know. Sometimes in the holidays they don't open the Sports and Rec (community sports and recreation facility) enough. The older boys tell us they get to go away to other towns and other places to play in some big Rugby League competitions against lots of other teams. ……they come back with some really cool shirts…they get proper games, you know with refs and coaches and everything like that. We only get to play touch here and when the AFL come to the school we get to play a bit. They also do rodeo at that school. We saw a proper rodeo yard and some of the boys do horse riding and learn about that stuff for school! (Year 6/7 Student 4)

For the girls who had been away to their schools for interview or orientation visits, one of the key things that they were looking forward to about their new living and learning environment was excitedly expressed in saying:

> When we get to go shopping we can meet up with the other girls from some of the other schools. We can all meet up. They said we get to go K Mart on Saturday afternoon when we finish our jobs at the boarding. (Year 6/7 Student 8)

And another:

> It will be good to make some new friends. Other girls tell us that we get to meet with the girls from other boarding schools. We get to go shopping on Saturday afternoon. Sometimes we get to go to the Gold Coast for the whole day. We went to the Gold Coast on our school trip this year and they said we can go again when we're at boarding school. (Year 6/7 Student 7)

The view that the transition to boarding would create opportunities for participation in a much broader range of activities than were on offer in Lockhart River was often expressed by younger students in simple and straightforward terms: "Things can get a bit slack here you know. Sometimes it gets really boring you know, especially when it's raining a lot or when there's no car to take us anywhere" (Year 6/7 Student 3).

The comments around the boredom that sometimes accompanies life in community, especially at the end of a long Christmas holiday during the Wet Season will be discussed further in parent and

guardian responses to the prospect of going away but they certainly reflect one of the difficulties boarding students face on returning to community for what is a very long Christmas break. Most boarding schools close their doors well before the end of November each year. For returning students who are well used to the structure and variety of boarding, the reality of an eight week break at a time when the community is generally closed by road to the outside world and when many community activities such as sport and recreation activities close for much of the holiday break, the boredom can be all encompassing: "It's (boarding school) NOT like here. Here is too slack, sometimes after school there's nothing to do except walk around. When you go to boarding school you can be really busy" (Older Student 4).

The opportunities afforded by being away from community for secondary school were further reinforced as follows:

> Our school gets us to do lots of dancing for things like NAIDOC Day and when we go to Church. We used to be really shy about getting painted up and dancing but the older boys helped us. I was shamed my first time at the assembly but when we danced my friends were really shocked. Now we really like to do these things. When you're a bit older you're not so shy. You get proud to do this. (Older Student 2)

For older students who were often keen to express their desire to return to school away from Lockhart River at the end of a very long Christmas break, the messaging to their younger peers on the cusp of transition was clear:

> They (boarding school staff) don't just let you sit around. You have to get involved in lots of activities. You get to go on excursions and school trips. You get to go to discos and dances and all of us have played sport for our school. (Older Student 4)

4.3 Just Getting There: Fear of Flying

At the beginning of each school year and each subsequent school term, students, sometimes with family members as escorts, board a mix of charter and scheduled flights for the journey back to school from Lockhart River. In remote communities across northern and central Australia student 'uplift' is a period of intense activity as students, their families and escorts prepare for the start of or return to school a long way from home. It is often a period when a range of emotions are on show.

For some Lockhart River students the journey is quite straight forward, a one and a half hour flight to Cairns. From there, students are picked up by buses and coaches and taken to their respective schools in the Cairns region. For others and their escorts the journey is more complicated involving multiple connections and navigating their way through airports in Townsville and Brisbane as students journey to schools in boarding 'hubs' such as Charters Towers, Toowoomba, Rockhampton and Yepoon.

A number of students and adult participants spoke of their concerns about flying out of Lockhart River on small charter planes. This was especially the case at the beginning and end of the school year, periods that coincided with the arrival of the Wet Season. The prospect of flying in bad weather during the Wet Season, flying without friends and flying without an escort was a cause of considerable anxiety expressed by a number of students, especially younger students. One participant expressed their feelings about the prospect of January travel in stating that: "I hope I get to fly on Skytrans with some of my friends and some of the older boys and girls who are going back to school. They don't get scared!" (Year 6/7 Student 2).

It was a view commonly expressed and supported by a friend: "I don't like those little planes you know. I reckon I'll be scared if I have to go on a charter!"(Year 6/7 Student 4).

While matters around issues of the logistics of travel for boarding students from remote communities have largely been ignored in the research literature, they are very real in the minds of students and there are many examples from Lockhart River and other communities of where children have 'bailed up' at the prospect of boarding small planes. The term 'bailing up' is common parlance in the remote communities of Queensland and refers to students refusing to board scheduled flights, most commonly at remote airports and airstrips at or just before the point of departure. Refusal to board a flight invariably means that a student's participation in education is interrupted until such times as the boarding provider contacts Abstudy and rebooks travel. It is not uncommon for boarding providers to see bailing up as school refusal and they will then not book an alternative flight. The anxiety around travel expressed by some children is interpreted as school refusal, not a legitimate expression of the fear of flying, often in adverse travelling conditions. For many adults in Lockhart River, concern over the safety of their children is amplified by the memories of the 2005 crash of a plane attempting to land in bad weather in which 15 people were killed. The loss of a further five lives in a 2020 plane crash, largely as a result of bad weather, further exacerbates and ultimately legitimises this concern.

The importance of understanding the logistics and realities around travel were succinctly expressed by one student participant:

> Yeah, I went way for the boarding school visit with my Nan…we went on Skytrans and then on QANTAS. That was Ok. We got a feed and the Transition ladies came and helped us get through the airport at Cairns and Brisbane. I don't want to go on a charter….it's too small and my Nan she doesn't like those little planes. (Year 6/7 Student4)

Most students expressed a clear preference to travel with their peers or their escorts on the larger scheduled services and this mirrors my experience of witnessing uplift in number of remote communities. 'Bailing up' is most common when smaller planes are involved.

4.4 The Issue of Choice

The question of school choice for Year 6 students going away to boarding school for the first time was one in which the students themselves did not appear to have a great degree of input. As mentioned earlier, students were aware of the fact that all but two of the 2015 Year 6 cohort did not have a place secured in boarding school for 2016 and the transition to boarding for Lockhart students at the end of their primary school had become 'normalized.' When Year 6 students were asked about how their respective schools had been chosen, it was clear that this was a decision that rested almost entirely with parents and guardians, most often in consultation with staff from the Transition Support Service. The following response was common when students were asked about how a school had been chosen:

> My family talked to the Transition ladies when they came here and came to the school. They knew where other Lockhart boys and girls went and they talked to our families about school…..we learned about the different schools from Transition (Transition Support Service) and then we talked to some of the older students who came back and they also talked to us about different schools. (Year 6/7 Student 8)

For a number of students there were schools that they did NOT want to attend:

> They said I could go to 'A' (Name of Boarding School). But I didn't want to go there because I spoke to some kids who went there before and they said there were fights all the time and things got stolen like mobile phones. Anyway all the kids who went there before, they got sent home. They don't do anything now. Sometimes they go to school here in Lockhart. My teacher and my nanna talked to the Transition ladies and they come with us and some of the other kids to (Boarding School where the student enrolled for 2016) for an interview. That was good and now I can go there with other Lockhart kids. (Year 6/7 Student 3)

The discussions around school choice revealed that a number of the Year 6 students were quite well informed about the schools they were going to attend and from conversations with families, older peers already away boarding and subsequent orientation visits they had formed views about the relative merits of a range of boarding schools and boarding providers. These views, not unsurprisingly, mirrored those of a number of Lockhart River adults who were very clear about what constituted a 'good school.' The views of students, parents and guardians and community members as to the characteristics of a 'good school' will be discussed in depth in in Chapter 6.

4.5 Introduction to Research Question One (b): How Do Those Who Have Children Who Are About to Experience the Transition View the Prospects of Their Going to Boarding School?

The discussions with parents, guardians and other community members held prior to the children leaving community to begin their secondary education revealed a mix of emotions that served to highlight just how significant an event the transition to boarding is for individuals and the wider

community. While the transition to boarding has become the norm for the majority of children at the end of primary school, it can be a time great distress for a family to see one or more of its children leave home for the first time to begin an education and life journey that they have not have experienced previously, or that may have previously proven to be so problematic for them with their older children or for other Lockhart River children. Similarly, it is no small matter for a remote Indigenous community to lose the majority of an entire year level cohort, especially when many of those leaving are perceived to be not only some of the community's best and brightest but also its most vulnerable in terms of their transitioning for the first time.

4.5.1 "It's a Bit Sad You Know, But There's Nothing For Them Here"

In terms of adult participants this is by far the most commonly occurring response when the question of young children leaving Lockhart River to attend boarding school is broached. It presents a paradox. Adults are open in acknowledging the problems that beset the community: high rates of unemployment, especially among the youth, chronic cannabis (gunja) use and its impact on the young, alcohol abuse, community in-fighting, especially among young women, teenage pregnancy, petty crime and a general sense of aimlessness among the young who either not left the community or who have been sent back prematurely from boarding school. While the Lockhart River State School offers an alternative secondary program, attendance rates for secondary school aged students in community are very low and there is a strongly prevailing view in the minds of adults and students that it is not a 'proper school.' This a view common across remote Indigenous communities on Cape York where the transition to secondary boarding has become the norm. For the 2015 Year 6 cohort which totaled 18 students, 13 had been enrolled in a secondary boarding school or residential facility at the end of the year when student and adult participants in the research were identified.

4.5.2 Sadness

"It's good for them to get away from all the humbug in community" is a commonly occurring comment. But it is clear that family and community members feel great sadness at the fact that their children have to go away from community to attend secondary school. Two adult respondents spoke of how they had 'grown up' the children in their care when their birth mothers were no longer able to look after them. For them, the anxiety of seeing the children they had looked after for so long leave the community was profound especially given the difficulties of maintaining contact across very significant geographic, cultural and language barriers. One parent expressed it thus:

> Sure, it's sad that they had to go away to school, but that's what we all had to do. Now we all know how to work, how to speak and write English properly. Some of this mob, they're stuck here and they can never get a decent job. They just walk around, smoke gunja, drink and do nothing except humbug. (Parent/Guardian 1)

For these women and a number of other older women who had been the primary care-givers to their grandchildren or young nieces and nephews the emotional contradictions at the prospect of the children they had raised being so far away and in the care of people they had never met was both daunting and confronting:

> I've looked after (Year 6 student) since he was one. His mother couldn't look after him so I took him to look after properly. I feel excited for him. They learn much more things when they go outside for school. But, I'm sad too. I had him since he was a baby but it's better to go away from the school here. You learn a lot when you get away from family, better experience. It's a bit sad, but you know kids take time to settle a bit. (Parent/Guardian 5)

The notion of the sadness that comes with children leaving the community, especially the Year 7 students leaving the community for the first time was similarly expressed by another older caregiver as follows:

> I think he's a bit scared. I think I'll be really worried for him. I looked after him since he was a baby. Child Safety asked me to look after him and others because his mother was drinking. She couldn't look after him. So I grow him up……I'll be really worried for him when he goes away. I see lots of other boys. They aren't scared so I tell him not to be scared. As long as he's got a friend or can make friends he'll be OK. (Parent/Guardian 4)

This is a telling comment and it reveals the depth of feeling experienced by parents and guardians as they prepare to send their children away. Given the vast distance that will separate children from their families post-transition, it is difficult to accurately and adequately capture the contrasting emotions that are present in the lead up to the day when the planes arrive and children and their escorts make their way south.

4.5.3 Wanting Opportunities for Children

The sadness and anxiety that are reflected in the discussions with parents and guardians as they prepare for the transition are clearly juxtaposed with the expectation that going away for secondary education will create opportunities for the children of the community that would never be available were they to continue their secondary education in Lockhart River. There is no simple cost-benefit analysis being undertaken here. There are a range of conflicting emotions on display and they reflect the complexity of the transition experience for all those involved. It is clear that parents and guardians see many aspects of community life as highly problematic for adolescents of secondary school age. One parent stated that:

> They need to go away. There is not much for them to do here. A lot of kids get into trouble when they come back so it's better for them to go away. Too much trouble here. Too much

> fighting. They just walk around. It's better for them to go away. You stay away from trouble that way. (Parent/Guardian 7)

The view that the transition to boarding would provide an escape from the troubles that appeared to be a common feature of community life at the time of the January interviews was expressed on a number of occasions. A number of the girls in the community were particularly unsettled in late January when the first interviews were conducted and fighting between individual girls and groups of girls was both a common occurrence and a real concern to parents and caregivers:

> It's good for my girls to go. It will be sad when they go but there is too much fighting here. I don't want them to stay here because the young women they're fighting all the time. They get a better education when they go away. I don't want them getting into trouble here. (Parent/Guardian 7)

A number of parents and guardians expressed a frustration bordering on anger with respect to what was happening for young people in community and saw going away to secondary school as an opportunity for children to escape what was at times a highly problematic environment:

> I hear all the humbug that goes on at night. People fighting, drinking. Young kids just walking around all night. They should be at home in bed but there's no one making them do that. Not just school holidays either……we see the ones that come back from boarding and don't go back. Up all night and we don't see them until the afternoon. We know they go with troublemakers and smoke gunja. And the girls. Well, you see them arguing and fighting all the time. They need to go away. (Community/Family Member 1)

Issues in community, especially with respect to the well-being of teenage boys and girls, certainly served to shape the views about the transition for a number of adults. While elements of the transition to boarding were seen as problematic, especially the sadness and anxiety expressed about children going away for the first time, staying in community was not an option. The perceived failure of students who had returned early from boarding over a number of years to engage meaningfully with the alternative program at offer at the local school or find any meaningful employment was, for a number of adult participants in the research, a shared concern that drove them to express a desire for the very best possible education outcomes for their children on the cusp of transition:

> There's just too much crap and trouble going on…those kids that came back early or didn't go away, they've got no hope for the future. There's no proper school here for older kids. They get into bad habits and start to follow the older ones who just do nothing. They get into trouble and then they don't want to work. (Parent/Guardian 1)

It is a point reinforced by one parent as follows:

> I'm feeling a bit sad for them going away, but also happy because they're going to a good school. Us families we all worry if our kids will get into trouble and maybe get sent home. Transition talk to us about that. Too many kids sent home before. They don't go back to school. Now they just walk around community. I want my girls to finish school. Come back and find a job. (Parent/Guardian 6)

For many adult respondents the transition to boarding presents children with the opportunity to avoid the negative aspects of community life, it is also clear that going away for secondary school also creates a range of future possibilities that would be difficult if not impossible to replicate in community. During the course of a long and buoyant conversation one care-giver stated that:

> He wants to be an AFL footballer or a policeman. He will have so many things to do in boarding school and there are too many problems for the younger ones here in community. We want him to stay there until Year 12 because kids come back here early and there's nothing for them to do here. They come back early and do nothing. They get into trouble. I tell him, you got to graduate. (Parent/Guardian 5)

As we spoke further about what might be in the future for this student she stated:

> I keep telling him to do the right thing. His uncle is very important to him and he talks to him about doing the right thing too. His uncle is like a big brother to him and talks about not getting into trouble. We all explain to him what we want. You have to listen and learn we tell him. Our extended family is very important. I hope he wants to make us proud. I want to help him get his dreams. You get to Grade 12 and be what you want to be. (Parent/Guardian 5)

The view that a secondary education away from Lockhart River would create opportunities for the community's young people was clearly and forcefully expressed by a number of other adult respondents. The clear link in the minds of adult respondents between successful Year 12 completion and opportunity in community was articulated as follows:

> We want our kids to finish Year 12 so they can come back here and do proper jobs, not just CDP or My Pathways. Council want to give kids who stay at school some work experience and then if they finish Year 12 they can do work here. We think we need to show the kids who stay at school that there are real jobs back in community. At the moment there are still too many jobs that people from outside come and do. We want our kids educated properly so they can do these jobs. Why can't our kids be teachers, nurses, properly trained electricians, builders and plumbers? (Community/Family Member 2)

In short, the feelings of adults regarding the aspirations they hold for their children in the transition to secondary school away from home were succinctly expressed by one parent who stated: "We want them to go away to proper schools and to get an education" (Parent/Guardian 6).

The adults who participated in this research were clear in the view that the education they seek for their children is not available in the community. Further to this, they are aware that the quality of the education available outside the community varies considerably and this will be discussed further when the factors behind a successful transition are examined later in this chapter and in Chapter 5.

4.5.4 "They're So Young Now. We Just Want Them to Be Safe"

A number of parents and guardians pointed out that the move of Year 7 into secondary school in 2015 meant that children were now required to transition away to boarding a year earlier than had previously been the case. For most children, this meant leaving home at the age of 11 or just after they had turned 12. They are quite different in terms of their developmental maturity to children who used to exit as 12 year olds turning 13. Parents and guardians are torn here. They acknowledge on the one hand that there are advantages to leaving the community earlier to start secondary school. The comment "there's nothing for them here" reinforces this. But they worry about the safety and well-being of children at age eleven leaving for boarding school. If they stay to Year 12 they will effectively be away from community and family for six years and not five.

The following comment by one parent articulates this clearly and the sentiments expressed here were supported by a number of other adults who participated in the research.

> We know they need to go away to get a proper education but they're so young now. Why did they change that? Why can't they go away at the end of Grade 7? They're so young now. Look at little (Year 6 Student). He's so small. In a year he'd be more ready to go away. (Parent/Guardian 8)

In the minds of the adult participants in this research, there had been no appropriate or extensive community consultation undertaken by the Queensland Department of Education and Training around the move of Year 7 into secondary school and the impact this would have on the transition to boarding and it was a move that created a concern for a number of parents and guardians. The mixed emotions that come with transitioning a year earlier were expressed by one of the parents:

> Look we want him to go away and we think he's going to a good school. But we do worry about them being so small. The other kids who've gone away, they've had another year to get ready. It's hard. We wish we could spend more time with them at the new school just to help get settled. But we only get a day or too. I know it's going to be hard for him and me when I have to come back and leave him there. (Parent/Guardian 2)

The statement reflects the complex and interrelated nature of the factors that influence how parents and guardians view the transition to boarding. The very young age at which children leave is of concern to many and a number of adults expressed a preference for their children to leave at the end of Year 7, while at the same time they acknowledged that each year children remained in community

they appeared to fall further behind their non-remote counterparts. Further to this, the travel and accommodation entitlements for family members travelling as escorts allowed very little time for them to participate in any meaningful way in the orientation of their children into their new life so far from home.

4.5.5 Safety in Transit

Students from to Lockhart River Year 6 class of 2015 were enrolled to attend secondary boarding schools and residential facilities in Cairns, Townsville, Yeppoon and Toowoomba. They would be moving to centres that were a long way from home and in the case of Yeppoon and Toowoomba, centres that could only be reached after a journey that involved close to a full day's travel. For parents and guardians, the physical separation brought with it considerable concerns regarding the safety and well-being of their children. The issue of the safety and well-being of their children who would be looked after by teaching and residential staff who, almost without exception, had no connection to Lockhart River families was one that served to shape how many viewed some of the more difficult elements of the transition. A number of distinct elements with respect to safety emerged during the course of the interview process, in particular the safety of children travelling to and from boarding and the 'cultural safety' of children making the move from their home community into a residential and learning environment far removed from that in which they had grown up.

In practical terms, a number of the younger students need an adult escort every time they fly to and from boarding but the organization of escorts is not always straight forward. Some adults are very worried about flying on small charter planes, especially very early or very late in the day and during the bad weather that comes with the Wet Season. Further to this, most have more than one child in their care, so the practicalities of undertaking the escorting of children to and from boarding can be highly problematic. The young age of the students raised a number of concerns on the part of parents and guardians regarding the safety of their children at different stages of the transition process. For those adults who had older children already in boarding, there was the expectation that older siblings would play a key role supporting their younger siblings and other relatives and the reassurance that, where travelling without an escort, the Transition Support Service would be around to ensure that young students in particular would be safe. The following reflects the concerns expressed:

> Well I'm going down there with my kids like we did for orientation, but some kids they travel on their own. We know that when they get to Cairns, the Transition ladies will be there to help them to get on their other planes. We worry sometimes about what will happen if they get scared or miss their plane. (Parent/Guardian 7)

The importance of escorted and supported travel and the possibility of assistance in transit in the event of interruptions to travel or things just 'going wrong' cannot be understated. During the course of both structured and unstructured conversations during the course of the research, parents and

guardians recounted stories of children being stuck on their own in Cairns following suspensions or exclusions or when returning to community to attend funerals.

One parent recounted the issues that arise as follows:

> It's hard for us to always go with them. But we need to make sure these little ones don't get scared if something happens. I'm going to travel with them when they go away this time because it's the start of the year and they might worry. But I have to get time off work and then I've got these other ones to look after. (Parent/Guardian 6)

Another parent expressed their concerns in saying:

> That's why we like them to travel together. That way the older kids can keep an eye on the younger ones. Me, I'm going down to the school this time because I want to make sure he knows what to do and I can have a look at the school. We didn't get much time when we went for interview and we only got to talk to the Principal. They should let us stay longer. That way we get to meet the teachers and house parents. (Parent/Guardian 1)

In the same way that the presence of older students in their destination schools can be a source of reassurance to parents and guardians when students leave community to go to boarding for the first time, older students who are 'experienced travelers' provide a degree of security and support for younger students in transit while the knowledge that staff from the Transition Support Service are at regional airports, especially in Cairns, is also an important factor in providing reassurance for families in Lockhart River.

4.6 "They're So Far Behind:" Education Provision in Community

For a number of participants, the perceived quality of primary school education in Lockhart River is a real issue and a number of parents and guardians expressed their concerns about how their children about to transition would cope with the demands of what in many cases would be an entirely new and different education environment.

> We know that when our kids get to some of these boarding schools they going to be a long way behind all the other kids. It was the same for us when we had to go away. Some of these kids that haven't gone to school much here in Lockhart, it's going to be even harder for them. (Community/Family Member 2)

All adults interviewed spoke of the need for children in this cohort to 'catch up' when they went away to boarding and a number had heard of transition classes that operated in a number of boarding schools:

> When (older student) went away, they put him and the other Cape boys in a transition class until they were ready to go into class with all the other boys. They said they were a bit shamed

> at first but they had a really good teacher who helped them and they had their own room where they could hang out sometimes. The Transition ladies have said that he (transitioning student) will go into that class until he's ready. (Parent/Guardian 8)

A number of parents and guardians who had children already in boarding were well aware of the challenges that the students leaving community for the first time would face.

> Some of these kids, they'll be OK because they go to school nearly every day. But some of this group, they missed a lot of school, just hanging around community when they should have been in class. We know they can't do that in boarding school. They get into trouble when they wag class. The older kids try telling those little ones that but they don't listen. That's why some of them get kicked out and sent home. (Parent/Guardian 1)

At the time this research was conducted in 2016, data from the MySchool website indicated that average daily attendance rates in Lockhart River for 2015 sat at around 65%, despite a school and community-wide focus on the importance of students being at school every day through the Commonwealth funded Remote Schools Attendance Strategy (RSAS). Throughout the school and the wider community, the 'Every Day Counts' slogan was prominently displayed, but for many students, sporadic attendance had become the norm. The importance of regular attendance as a factor in the successful transition to boarding was not lost on adult participants.

> My kids, they're used to being at school nearly every day. They've learned to speak good English and they know how to behave in class. But there's kids in this class who haven't been able to get a place in a good school. I think there's one or two who have to stay here because they didn't get a place in a boarding school. That's because they don't know how to behave. (Parent/Guardian 6)

A number of parents and guardians, especially those who had children already in boarding or who had previously had children go away for secondary schooling were clear and unequivocal about the gaps that existed between schooling in Lockhart River and what their children would experience when they went away to boarding.

> We know it's going to be hard for some of them, especially early on because in that boarding school the kids are used to being in class and following the rules. Teachers down there they won't put up with all that rubbish, you know, teasing, fighting and swearing and not doing what you're told. They won't just let kids wander around like they do here. Some of these kids don't know how to speak English properly because they haven't been to school enough. They never catch up then they get into trouble and get kicked out. (Community/Family Member 3)

In the minds of parents and guardians, there existed a clear correlation between issues of behavior and attendance in Lockhart River and the likely chances of success for students transitioning

to boarding. It is also clear that when it comes to the options in choosing a secondary school for Year 7, students with high levels of attendance and a record of positive behavior in Lockhart River in 2015 had a much better chance of winning a place in a boarding destination of their choice for 2016.

4.7 Choice: "Well, They Can't Stay Here"

The notion of 'choiceless choice' is common to discussions in the contested space that is the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities for students from remote Indigenous communities across Australia. Put simply, the perceived quality of secondary education in remote Indigenous communities is so poor that parents and guardians must choose boarding if they want their children to access a quality secondary education, or if secondary education provision is not offered in the home community. In a number of Indigenous communities throughout remote Australia, including remote Queensland, there is no secondary education provision at all so the choice for parents and guardians is not whether their children will remain in community or leave in order to attend secondary school, the choice comes down to which boarding school or residential facility they will attempt to find for their children. For example, Pormpuraaw, Coen, Mapoon and the communities outside of Thursday Island in the Torres Strait have no secondary education facilities at all. To access secondary education, children must leave their home communities.

While the Queensland Department of Education promotes Lockhart River State School as offering an education to Year 12, the adults who participated in this research were clearly of the view that, while the transition to boarding could be problematic, they had no choice if they wanted their children to access opportunity and a quality secondary education:

> Well, you know, we worry when our kids go away but they can't just stay here. The kids who go to secondary here…it's not a proper school. We all know that and the kids know that. That's why they don't go every day. The young ones who come back, they get caught up in all the fighting, especially the girls. The ones who come back early, they all end up having babies and then we (the parents and grandparents) have to look after the babies because these kids don't know how to be proper fathers and mothers, they're too young to do that. (Community/Family Member 1)

It is clear that remaining in community is not regarded as a viable option. As one participant stated bluntly: "There's no proper school here for older kids" (Community/Family Member 2). He went on to add:

> They talk about reinstating secondary school in Aurukun. I know these kids who get kicked out of boarding school need something but to build a full secondary school is a bad idea. Staying here isn't really the answer. We need to get our kids out to secondary school if they're going to get a good education. You look at the kids who've gone away and come back early or

> the ones who never left. None of them are working. What future have they got?"(Community/Family Member 2)

At the time this research was conducted it was clear that the wider Lockhart River community regarded the secondary education on offer as highly problematic in terms of the subjects and programs on offer and the attitude the secondary students had towards their education in community. The following statement reflects clearly the view of a number of the adults about the secondary school:

> We all know it's not really a proper school and the kids know that too. Some days there's hardly any kids turn up. They just come and go. They don't even wear uniforms. When some of them do go they just make trouble for the younger ones. It's not good for the little ones at school to see the older ones just walk around the school. When the older ones walk out, some of the young ones follow them out and then they don't come back to school. The ones who come back from boarding because they get kicked out, they know it's not a proper school so that's why they don't turn up much. They get bored. They need to go back to school away from the community for their secondary education. (Parent/Guardian 1)

One other parent stated bluntly: "Well no one ever finished Year 12 there in that school!" (Parent/Guardian 6).

In the minds of those who participated in the research it is clear that, despite the considerable challenges that come with the transition to boarding at the end of Year 6 and maintaining a place in a boarding school or residential facility such a long way from home for six years, remaining in community for secondary school is not an option that the community view favorably.

4.8 Maintaining Connection to Country and Culture

Most adult participants in the research were clear in the view that the transition to boarding was a far better option for secondary school aged students than remaining in community. But at the same time, they want their children to remain connected to community and to remain connected to culture. They want their children who go to boarding school to learn how to live 'on country.' They want these children to dance with their elders at the Laura Dance Festival and to represent their community at significant events such as the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF). Lockhart River dancers are known nationally for the strength of their culture as expressed through dance and featured prominently at a number of key events during the conduct of the 2018 Commonwealth Games. The active role that community have to play here when students return to community is expressed succinctly as follows:

> When they come back for holidays we don't just want them sitting around playing X Box or walking around all night. We need to get them out to country. All these kids got families who go out bush. Kids need to make sure they go out there when they come back for holiday. No

> fighting or humbug out there. That way we get to teach them the stories for their place. (Community/Family Member 2)

The importance of maintaining this connection to country and culture during the years of secondary education away from community was seen by adult respondents as a means by which they could maintain strong influence over how their young people developed a strong and positive sense of identity. One parent stated:

> We've seen some kids go away and they get real soft and don't want to get out and do things in the bush. We also want the boys to keep up with their culture when they get back, do their dancing and get ready for things like Laura. Sometimes when they go away kids can get embarrassed or ashamed about this stuff. We want to make sure they're still proud of this. (Parent/Guardian 1)

The idea that going away for secondary education would disrupt the connection to place and culture did not appear in any of the interviews. Indeed, for a number of respondents it was clear that maintaining this connection was clearly an individual and community responsibility:

> Look, we've got to get them away to boarding school. The ones that stay here, they've got no respect for their elders and grandparents. But when they come back for holidays, we've got to get them out doing things on country. (Parent/Guardian 2)

This comment reflects clearly the view that for this community at this point in time, there is no direct correlation between remaining in community for secondary education and remaining connected to country and culture. The view that troubled students or those in community who were disengaged from education would, by virtue of being in community and not away from community for their secondary education, be more connected to country and culture than their boarding peers, was not one held by any of the adult participants in the research. In fact, the opportunity for students away at boarding to celebrate and demonstrate their culture in the boarding/residential setting during events such as NAIDOC Day or Reconciliation Week and then participate in important local events such as the Laura Dance Festival or Cairns Indigenous Art Fair was acknowledged by a number of adult participants in the research. They believed that the responsibility for 'teaching culture' rested with the community and if that meant for students who were away from community for secondary school that this occurred during the school holidays, so be it.

4.9 How Previous Experience Shapes the Sense of Anticipation

For a number of adult participants, it was clear that their sense of anticipation was in large part shaped by their previous experience of the transition to boarding, be it their own experience as children or for other children with whom they had previous direct experience. This reinforces the fact that for the adults and children of Lockhart River, boarding as a means of accessing education had in

large part become ‘normalized.’ However, while there was a clear expectation that nearly all children would leave the community for secondary school, the previous experience of parents and guardians in having their children go away exerted a powerful influence on how their personal construction of meaning around how the experience for this cohort would be shaped:

> Some of his cousins have gone away to boarding school, so we get used to seeing these kids go away for high school. I grew up in Hope Vale you know, on the mission. So we are used to seeing young people go away to school. (Parent/Guardian 5)

Where the previous experience had been constructed as positive this created a sense of expectation that the prospective transition would go well:

> I’ve had other children go away. They’re doing well at school now. They at first didn’t want to go but then they said it was good to go away because they get to do a lot of different things. Said sometimes here is really boring. Other family members too, they go away to boarding in Toowoomba and Townsville and other places. They get to do new things. They like to go and see new places. They can’t do that if they stay here. I talk to my kids about that. (Parent/Guardian 6)

In the same way, another participant stated:

> I think he’ll be OK. He’s a good boy. He’s seen his older cousins go away before. He knows that (Former Boarding Student) finished Year 12 and was a good student. I’m pretty sure he wants to be like his cousin. (Parent/Guardian 5)

The sense of positive expectation was heightened further if the transitioning student had a direct sibling currently away at boarding: Her older sister is doing really well in school, so she’s going to that school too. I’ve visited that school and I know the Principal. She’s been here before (Parent/Guardian 6).

There were however, respondents whose sense of anticipation was tempered by the fact that they had seen their other children go away from community and then return prematurely. For them, that experience had built a sense of caution around the prospect of the upcoming transition:

> My grandson and granddaughter, they went to boarding school. I think she went in Year 9 or Year 10 to Toowoomba, but it didn’t work out and she came home…they’re back here now. They made some friends, but they didn’t go back to school when they came back here. I worry a bit about that for him too. (Parent/Guardian 4)

For others where the previous experience of transition had been problematic, the response had been to engage fully in the processes through which a boarding school or residential facility was chosen. The following response demonstrates how one parent responded to previous experiences:

> We had (Older Child) go away but that didn't work out too well. They got caught up in the wrong crowd, but at least they can read, write and speak English. They had a look at the real world away from this place. They might still do OK. Now with (Year 6 Student) we want to make sure he goes to the right place. You know I took him for an interview a (First choice boarding school), but they were bloody shocking. In the end we just walked out. They were really unfriendly about him. That's why we want to send him to (Alternative choice boarding school). (Parent/Guardian 1)

4.9.1 The Value of Structured Support in Preparing to Leave Community

In Chapter 1, an outline of the work of the Queensland Education Department Transition Support Service was provided. The important role played by this service is a recurring theme and is discussed at length further on in this dissertation but its significance in shaping how adults construct meaning around the prospect of transition must be articulated here. In short, as parents and guardians prepared and planned for the transition of their children to secondary school away from Lockhart River at the start of 2016, they did so in the knowledge that the TSS was instrumental in supporting children and families through the application and enrolment process. It was also clear in the minds of parents and guardians that TSS would play a key role in arranging and supporting travel to and from interviews at boarding facilities throughout Queensland, will provide support to students in boarding and will provide support to allow students to travel safely to and from their schools away from community at the beginning and end of each school term.

All of the parents and guardians who participated in this research spoke of the role of the TSS at all stages of the period prior to the start of the 2016 school year and the strong partnership that existed between TSS staff and teaching staff from Lockhart River State School. When it came to the process of selecting an appropriate school, the following responses were common: "His teachers and the ladies from Transition, they talked to us about schools. They said that this school would be good for him. He likes to play sport and there are other Lockhart boys going there" (Parent/Guardian 5). And: "I talk to the Transition ladies. We went with them to the interview meeting at the school. When he didn't get accepted into that school, Transition came with us to the interview at (Alternative choice)" (Parent/Guardian 4).

For a number of parents and guardians, especially those who had children leaving the community to attend boarding for the first time, the support provided by 'the Transition ladies was especially critical: "Without the Transition ladies we wouldn't want to go to the schools. They come with us and help us get ready for interviews" (Parent/Guardian 7).

For a number of these parents and guardians, the world of the boarding school is foreign and unfamiliar and it is clearly a world in which they feel uncomfortable in entering with any degree of confidence without a degree of structured support.

The importance of the work of the Transition Support Service in partnership with staff from Lockhart River State School was clearly understood by a number of parents and guardians and the wider community, especially when it came to perceptions around the readiness of students to make the transition: “He’s been ready for a long time. All his friends are going away to boarding school and his sister is in boarding. School here and TSS have worked really hard to get these kids ready” (Parent/Guardian 2).

The work done by Transition Support Service staff in visiting the schools attended by Lockhart River students and in supporting student travel was also a very important factor in allaying parent and guardian concerns regarding the safety of children in transit that was referred to earlier in section 4.7. It was expressed succinctly as follows: “Well it’s OK because we know the Transition ladies will look after them and they can talk to us” (Parent/Guardian 8).

Acknowledgement of the work done by TSS staff is further explored in Section 5.4 where the factors behind a successful experience of the transition are examined in detail, suffice to say that in the period leading up to the day when the 2016 Lockhart River Year 7 cohort would leave to take up a place in a boarding school or residential facility, the concerns of parents, guardians and community members about the transition experience were significantly allayed through the knowledge that their children would be supported by ‘the Transition ladies.’

4.10 Summary of Research Questions 1 (a) and 1 (b)

While the literature around the transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students has grown significantly in the period 2013-2019, much of it has focused on the experience of adults and children ‘looking back’ over periods of varying duration. There has been very little in the research that has explored the experience of children and adults as they attempt to construct meaning around how the transition *will be* experienced for the children who leave the safety and security of the home and community and how the transition experience *will be* for those who have raised them.

It is clear from student responses that they view and anticipate the prospects of leaving the community with a mix of emotions: a nervousness shaped in large part by entering into a space so different to that which they were used to, tempered by a sense of anticipation and in some cases excitement. Children’s views of the transition to come were in large part shaped by the experiences of older peers or siblings and how these had been recounted, the knowledge that in some instances other students from Lockhart River would be at their new school and the nature and quality of their interaction with their new school during their orientation or interview visits. None of the children interviewed in the period leading up to their leaving the community stated that they did not want to go away for school or that they would have preferred to remain in Lockhart River. This will be examined more detail in the findings section.

For parents, guardians and community members interviewed in January just prior to their children leaving the community, a complex and deeply felt range of emotions were articulated. Chief among these was a strong sense of sadness at the fact that their children had to go away, often 'so far away' to access a quality and comprehensive secondary education. The articulation of this sense of sadness was almost always followed with a 'but' shaped by a sense of deep frustration and at times anger at what was happening in the community in terms of the creation of any sort of meaningful future for children of secondary school age. The 'humbug' exemplified by the conflict in community and the widely held view that local secondary education had little of value to offer young people meant that the transition to boarding, while problematic, was viewed as creating opportunities for young people both now and into the future which could not be accessed were children to remain in Lockhart River for their secondary education.

Adult perspectives on the transition to occur in January 2016 were also shaped in large part by previous experiences of going away to boarding, either their own as young people or those of their other children. Where previous experiences had been largely positive, there was a more optimistic view that the transition would be successful, especially where the children and their families would enjoy the support of the Transition Support Service in terms of facilitating communication between schools and family members in community, visiting the students in boarding and ensuring students safety in transit.

As the students prepared to leave community in late January 2016, no parents guardians or community members expressed the view that their children would be better off to remain in Lockhart River to begin their secondary their secondary education.

4.11 Introduction to Research Question Two (a) What Is the Lived Experience of the Transition to Boarding School for Students?

It is clear from the interviews held with transitioning students in July and December of 2016 that their lived experiences of boarding in their first semester and year away from community matched closely with the anticipated views they had expressed in their interviews prior to transition. The dominant theme for children prior to transition was that of nervous expectation and anxiety coupled with a sense of excitement about what lay ahead. As the students reflected upon and commented upon their experience of being away from community, their feelings were similarly mixed: homesickness, adjusting to new routines, the demands of the school work by comparison with what they had experienced in their primary school years in Lockhart River were viewed against the new and exciting opportunities that had come as a result of the transition. Students spoke of 'doing things,' taking the opportunities that had opened by being away from community, the making of new friends and the prospect of doing a range of 'new things' that would come with being in the boarding environment when they got back to school. In large part, student responses to questions about how the transition

period had been, especially the critical settling in period of the first semester, revealed a remarkable sense of resilience on the part of the students and underscored the importance of this cohort being well prepared as a consequence of the work done with students and families by the 2015 Year 6 teachers in Lockhart River, the staff from the Transition Support Service and the degree of engagement in the preparation for transition from a number of parents and guardians.

4.11.1 "It's Pretty Hard, But We're Getting Used to It." Strictness and Following Routines

All students spoke at length of how different boarding was to going to school in Lockhart River in terms of rules to follow and expectations around behavior. The perceived strictness of boarding as opposed to schooling in community was not problematic but it 'took a bit to get used to.' When asked about what they had found hard about the first weeks of being in a very new environment student responses revealed the fundamental disconnect between where they had come from in schooling terms and where they now found themselves:

> We have to make sure we get ready on time with all our things, you know like our uniform and our books. Our school is very strict about uniform and following rules. We got into trouble early, but our house parents and the older boys they made sure we got things ready. The older boys they help us a lot…….in Lockhart we just turned up to school…no bag no nothing because it all stays in the classroom for the next day. But most of us you know, we got used to it. (Year 6/7 Student 3)

The following of strict boarding and day-school routines that were a world away from what students had experienced in Lockhart River did not seem particularly stressful for students. Indeed, it seemed to pale into insignificance by comparison with the need for students to either maintain or find friends and friendship groups. The level of support offered to students in that initial settling period and during the course of their first full year away was clearly an important factor in adjusting to the routines of boarding and it is clear that both school staff and, where appropriate, older students had a role to play here. One student put it thus during the December interviews when they had an opportunity to talk about their first year away from home:

> Before we came away we used to worry about all the strict rules the older boys told us about and the things they told us when we went down for interviews. But it's not too bad. Our house parents and teachers are good. They growl us sometimes but we had the older boys to tell us how to fix things. (Year 6/7 Student 4)

One of his friends who also attended the same school added: "Miss (teacher in a transition class) she looked after us and made sure we got everything so the other teachers didn't growl us and make us feel ashamed. We don't like to get detentions" (Year 6/7 Student 1).

The significance for younger students of feeling that they would be 'looked after,' be it by teaching or residential staff or by older peers, cannot be overstated. For this cohort of students, it appeared that this was of particular importance during their settling in phase.

4.11.2 "The Work Is Much Harder!"

In addition to the massive social learning that had to take place for students to function effectively in the boarding/residential side of school life, so it was in the classroom. When interviewed in December and January prior to transition, students spoke of their academic concerns about just how difficult they believed the work would be. As they discussed their actual experience of being away for secondary school, the students expressed a variety of views: "Yeah, the work is hard but we get a lot of support in the transition class and they help us with the work. Miss (teacher at the school)) she's really nice to us boys" (Year 6/7 Student 4).

Indeed, as was the case with adjusting to the routines, students did not see the very different demands of school work in boarding by comparison with what they had experienced in Lockhart River as particularly problematic. It was clear that most of the students interviewed felt that their schools had provided them with the support required to engage with their learning in a new environment:

> Sometimes the work is hard for us to understand but we get help with homework after school so that we don't get into trouble with the teachers. The school lets us use the computers to do assignments and we also have a laptop to use. We just have to make sure we have a charger so that we don't get into trouble. If we go with no battery, some teachers will give us a detention. (Year 6/7 Student 3)

One student spoke of how she and other 'Cape girls' had found it hard to be in class all day when they arrived in their new school, but that within a short space of time they had learned to adjust to a very new set of demands:

> When we were here (in community) for school, a lot of kids didn't come to school every day and sometimes we would just get up and walk around but we can't do that now. We have to put our hand up and get a note if we want to be out of class. But now we got used to being in class. Sometimes they let all of us girls work together and we like it when they do that. It's boring to have to work on your own all the time if the work is too hard. (Year 6/7 Student 8)

Again, the sense of being in a classroom with students who were experiencing the same transition away from home, meant a great deal to these students as they worked to establish themselves in a new and challenging environment.

4.11.3 Staying Connected to Family and Friends

For an eleven or twelve year old student from a remote Indigenous community, the transition to secondary school a long way from home presents a daunting prospect. All students spoke of the

importance of having friends, siblings or other students from their home community with them as a key factor in shaping their experience of their new environment. Through the eyes of a twelve year old, the importance of a sense of connection back to community that is created in a new and challenging boarding environment by having familiar faces with them cannot be overstated. It is well articulated by one transitioning student who stated that: "I miss my family, but for me it's OK because my big sister is here and most of us girls in the boarding house we all get along" (Year 6/7 Student 6).

It is a view echoed by one of the boys who was part of a small group who were attending the same school and which also had a small group of older Lockhart River students: "Us boys we, all get on and so that makes it a bit easier for us and the older boys they also help us out" (Year 6/7 Student 3).

The responses of student participants as they reflected on their early experiences of the transition to secondary school away from community highlight the importance for them of having the support of other students from Lockhart River during that first year away from community. For a number of these students, it is a key factor in shaping the transition experience. The resilience of some students in navigating their way through the transition without the support of other Lockhart students is articulated in the following response:

> Sometimes I want to go back home. There's no one else at boarding from Lockhart….I like to go out hunting. The older boys take me when I come home for holiday. It's really good to come home because we get to go pig hunting and then we get to go out fishing. But I've made some good friend too from other places at boarding and when my uncle comes to Cairns he sometimes takes me out for weekend leave and we get to stay with family so that's good. Sometimes when I'm homesick, Miss (boarding staff member) lets me ring home when I don't have any phone credit. (Year 6/7 Student 2)

The sense of isolation and separation from family and friends can very quickly govern how young people perceive the transition. For one student who returned to Lockhart River before the end of the first year away, the experience of the transition had been highly problematic:

> I didn't have any friends there. Not many people talked to me. It was boring….lots of people just ran around. There was lots of fighting and swearing going on at that place. They said I used to climb on the roof but I only did that once. I didn't like boarding and I got kicked out. (Year 6/7 Student 5)

For this student and for his guardian, the telling of his experience of the transition to boarding school was very difficult. It can clearly be interpreted as a story of alienation, disconnection and disempowerment. The experience was such that in the mind of the child and his guardian there would not be any attempt to find an alternative boarding placement.

4.12 Opportunity and Variety

For nearly all students interviewed, the transition to boarding presented an opportunity to participate in a very wide range of activities both in the day school and in boarding. For a number of the students, it was this exposure to a range of new activities that seemed to 'compensate' for the inherent difficulties with being so far from home. One student expressed this as follows:

> It's really good there. We get to do lots of things and go for trips. I have made some good friends from other communities and some of the white boys. I enjoy all the sport and the trips we go on. It's nice to come home (to Lockhart River), but yeah, I want to go back there for school. (Year 6/7 Student 4)

The responses here tended to mirror closely the feelings expressed by students as they prepared to make the transition. Nearly all students in the pre-transition phase had expressed the desire to be able to engage in activities and opportunities that were not available at home and almost most students interviewed at the end of the first semester and the end of their first school year stated that they were keen to return to school at the end of the holidays. In a number of instances, they made reference to specific events that they were looking forward to in Year 8:

> When we get back to school we get to go on camp. We went on camp for Year 7 and it was really good. All we boys had a really good time. Every year you get to go on camp and we do excursions for school and on the weekends we sometimes get to go with all the other boarders to go swimming, go shopping or watch the footy. (Year 6/7 Student 1)

As would be expected in having students attend a wide variety of schools, this positive view of the opportunities and variety that came with attending secondary school away from home was not shared by all students: "Sometimes the boarding is slack. We just sit around and they won't let us do anything" (Year 6/7 Student 7).

Not surprisingly, when asked about how they felt about going back to boarding at the start of the new school year, this student was non-committal: "I'll go back but only if the other kids go back too" (Year 6/7 Student 7). Without prompting they went on to add: "Our Principal is mean…..Yeah, she's really mean. She doesn't talk to us. She just growls us!" (Year 6/7 Student 7)

For students at this particular school the notion of feeling 'looked after' appeared to be largely absent and their comments reflect a degree of detachment quite dissimilar from that expressed by students in other schools who felt that they had both older students and school and residential staff who had made them welcome and who appeared to engender the sense of belonging so critical to success in the early stages of the transition.

4.13 Transition and Climate Shock: "It's Cold!"

The factors that shape the experience of the transition to boarding for Lockhart River students and which will ultimately underpin its success or failure are complex and interrelated. Students' experiences of their first semester/year away from community, from family and friends and a familiar environment, reflect that complexity. However, in asking how the first semester or year had been for a number of students who were in schools in places such as Toowoomba, Brisbane or Rockhampton well away from the tropical climate of Far North Queensland, an unexpected but surprisingly common set of responses made reference to the impact of the climate, or more specifically the effects of 'climate shock.' Succinct responses from student participants included:

> When it gets cold we got into trouble for not getting out of bed on time. We're not used to it being so cold and so dark and we didn't bring enough proper clothes. We had a talk to Miss (from Transition Support) and she took us to Saturday shopping at Target to get thick socks and some jumpers. (Year 6/7 Student 7)

And:

> When we came for interview with our Nanna it was hot. They didn't tell us it would be so cold. We never got that cold back home……on those cold mornings we just wanted to stay in bed. We got into trouble with the boarding parents because we wouldn't get out of bed. (Year 6/7 Student 8)

There are a number of closely related factors at play here. Lockhart River parents and guardians want their children in schools they regard as 'good schools.' The majority of these schools are located well away from the tropics and the climate of Lockhart River where winters are mild and short by comparison with those experienced in southern Queensland. Many younger children leave Lockhart River wearing thongs as footwear (the minimum requirement for boarding a charter or Skytrans flight) and quite quickly find that the southern climate does not always lend itself to tropical attire. While on the surface matters around climate may be considered somewhat minor or even mildly amusing, being cold has a significant impact on the physical and psychological well-being of children who are not used to being cold and see their non-Indigenous boarding peers well-attired and suitably prepared for a southern winter in places like Brisbane, Toowoomba and even Rockhampton.

The presence of weather events such as fog and frost are most unusual in Lockhart River and all Cape communities. They are the norm in inter for places such as Toowoomba and their impact, especially on young children who may already be struggling to adjust to the complexities of transition, can be significant. One student participant spoke in detail about her first experience of a cold winter in stating that:

> All the white girls and some of the black girls they all had proper school jackets to wear when it got cold at recess and lunchtime. We were a bit shamed when it started to get cold because we didn't have that winter jacket. Same for PE (Physical Education) clothes. We had to wait for our money to come from home to buy those things…….sometimes the house parents got cranky with us. They said that they tried to talk to our family in Lockhart River to send money for clothes but they (family in Lockhart River) never rang back. We had to wait because they didn't put money in our keycard for uniform. We spoke to Miss (from Transition) and she got us some uniforms but sometimes they were second hand and didn't fit. They should tell us what we need to get before we go. (Year 6/7 Student 7)

This is a particularly illuminating response. It reveals how a small and minority group of students who may already feel marginalized in an environment far from home, experience situations that serve to further fuel their sense of marginalization and separateness. The potential impact of a cascading series of small and marginalizing experiences on the education of children far from their home communities is, at times, depressingly predictable: a wrongly interpreted look or word from another student or from a staff member unsympathetic to the situation of students from remote Indigenous communities can lead to what is commonly referred to as a 'blow up.' A child snaps: says something or does something at the end of a series of stressful experiences and is excluded from their school. For many students in this situation, this is the end of their secondary education: what are perceived by boarding or day school staff as unacceptable outbursts which lead to exclusion can make it very difficult for families, Lockhart River school staff or staff from the Transition Support Service to find children an alternative secondary boarding placement. It is clear that students who return to Lockhart River rarely engage in any meaningful or productive way in the alternative secondary program on offer and no secondary school aged student has ever completed their secondary education in Lockhart River with any recognized form of certification.

4.14 Introduction to Research Question 2 (b). What Is the Lived Experience of the Transition to Boarding School for Parents, Guardians and Community Members?

During the course of the interviews held in community in July and December 2016, adult participants in the research all acknowledged the importance of Lockhart River children being able to access quality education experiences outside of the community.

But it is clear that for parents and guardians, their experience of the transition elicited a range of very strong and often conflicting emotions. For some, the experience of having a child in their care away for the whole year had gone particularly well and was a source of quite considerable pride. For others, the experience had at times been problematic and it is clear from the responses that follow that a range of factors are at play in determining the quality of the transition experience, in particular the perceived quality of the school and boarding environment.

4.14.1 "We're All Pretty Proud of Our Kids When They Stick at School"

School attendance rates in Lockhart River are, like those for very remote and remote Indigenous communities across Australia, a cause of considerable concern. In 2015, the average attendance rate in Lockhart River for all students was 69%, with only 16% of all students with an attendance rate of 90% or above. (ACARA, MySchool, 2019). Rates of secondary school attendance are not publicly available but anecdotal evidence suggests that they have been consistently below the average for the school as a whole and it is not unusual for students enrolled in the secondary program to miss consecutive weeks of schooling or turn up for part of a day on consecutive days and then not attend school for days or a period of weeks.

At the time this research was conducted, the secondary program was regarded as 'an alternative program' and more of a strategy aimed at keeping young people engaged with education rather than offering a formal program of instruction tied to a an externally recognized form of certification such as the Queensland Certificate of Education. Parents, guardians and adult community members believe that to engage in any meaningful way in secondary education, children need to be away at boarding and when asked to reflect on how the early experiences of transition had been, a number of adults expressed their pride in seeing the children in their care engage in full-time secondary education in a way that would be difficult to replicate were they to have remained in community. One parent/guardian stated with pride that:

> We are really proud of him. We have missed him but he seems to be very happy and we are pleased that he has finished the whole year. He already talks about going back next year. It will be good for him to have a holiday here but we want him to go back. (Parent/Guardian 5)

This particular discussion is worth covering in detail because it is a powerful articulation of the strong desire parents and guardians have for the children in their care to be both happy and successful, it states in clear and unambiguous terms the importance of strong peer relationships in supporting success in the early stages of the transition to boarding and it highlights the value in research of building relationships that allow for both depth and continuity in building a comprehensive picture of the transition experience. As we spoke of how the year had been for one particular student, the conversation turned to a number of earlier conversations, especially those that occurred in the period leading up to the children leaving community to begin their secondary education well away from Lockhart River:

> Remember when I spoke to you at the start of the year and I said that his uncle and I had talked to him about making us proud and making sure he was good? He said he likes it at that school because the older boys look after him and he's made lots of friends. There are other Lockhart boys at that school and they all get on together. (Year 7 student) didn't go back but

> that was because of a family problem. I think he's going to go back there next year. (Parent/Guardian 5)

When asked if they believed that their child had enjoyed their first full year away from home, another parent spoke of the interplay between boarding and community factors in shaping the complexities of the transition. The response offers a comprehensive and reflective view of the transition that connects very clearly with the expectations and motivations that had been expressed earlier in the year:

> Look, I think sometimes he got a bit homesick. I think all the kids who go away to boarding get homesick sometimes especially if they don't feel well or if they have arguments or fights at school or if they hear that fighting is going on back home here. He tells me that he likes his school, that there is a lot for the boys to do and that he gets on well with his teachers. It's much better for him and for the other boys to be down there at boarding school, that way they can stay away from all of the fighting and the humbug that goes on here. (Parent/Guardian 1)

The potential negative impact of community disruptions, especially conflict between students who had disengaged from education both in boarding and in community, on students in their first year of transition was further articulated as follows:

> Some of the older boys and some of the younger girls are always fighting and arguing. It's not good for our younger ones to see all that. They are better off to be at boarding school with learning new things and doing new things. He tells me he's going to finish Year 12. I hope he does. (Community/Family member 1)

It is clear that parents and guardians in Lockhart River take great pride in the individual and collective achievements of their children who are successful in the boarding environment and that this sense of pride contrasts greatly with the frustration and disappointment that surfaced when they spoke of the situation that confronted individuals and the wider community when secondary school aged students disengaged from their education and drifted into community 'humbug.'

4.14.2 Communication: "They Should Talk To Us More. Why Don't They Come Here?"

When discussing how the transition to boarding had been for them as parents and guardians nearly all adult participants in the research spoke of their concerns at the difficulties in maintaining communication with the schools their children attended. They pointed to the fact that the boarding schools and residential facilities responsible for the education of Lockhart River children rarely, if ever, visited the community. There were two clear examples of where boarding providers were seen to have made a real effort to engage with the community, one in particular where the Principal of one school had taken the time and effort to visit the family of children attending her school.

> That Principal from (boarding school attended by my children) you know, she's been to this community a few times and she's come to visit me and the kids at the house here. She knows a bit about this community and I know that my eldest daughter she can talk to that Principal and that Principal knows about what happens in community sometimes and why it gets hard for our kids sometimes when they're away from home. (Parent/Guardian 6)

This was a view supported by another parent whose child had secure a place in a school that would universally be regarded by the Lockhart River community as a 'good school.'

> And there's that other school in (boarding school in Toowoomba). That Indigenous Liaison Officer from that school she's been coming here for years. That's why (a student in Year 12 in 2016) is finishing Year 12 there this year. I know her mum and dad they talk about visiting that school and they get a place to stay and a proper chance to talk to the teachers and the boarding parents we want to get our kids into more schools like that. (Parent/Guardian 2)

There was a clearly articulated desire on the part of a number of parents and guardians to engage in a more meaningful way with the staff of boarding schools and residential facilities and given the costs and difficulties associated with travelling away from Lockhart River it was felt that it would be more appropriate for teachers and boarding staff to make the journey to community to meet with students and families and learn more about the environment that the children called 'home':

> We would like to schools to talk more to us, maybe it would be good if they would send staff up at the end of every term when the boys come home that way they could come and see us and talk to us here and they could also learn more about where the boys are from. We talk about that a lot sometimes to schools to send teachers here and we know that a couple of the principals have been here but they don't come very often. (Parent/Guardian 8)

When one parent was asked about the interactions between boarding and community for their child in Year 7, they responded with an answer that revealed again the desire for staff to come and spend time on country:

> No, I haven't been down the school again. I went down to the school last year for his interview. I met with the principal and I had a good look at the school. They haven't told me that I need to go down there again, sometimes family members go down to the schools when the kids are in trouble, but I think he's a good boy and he and the other boys at that school don't get into much trouble and they are always keen to go back at the end of the holidays. Maybe it would be better for some of the teachers from that school to come up to the community and visit us here. It is easier for them to come up here than it is for us to go all the way down there. It takes a long time and we need to stay at motels. (Parent/Guardian 3)

Another parent responded as follows:

> Teachers need to come out to community and see kids who are confident and happy. When our kids go away for the first time they can seem to be quiet or shamed to do things or they might not know how to behave in that new place. It takes time you know for our kids to learn all about their new place. I think teachers would learn a lot about what our kids can do if they came here……..how many other kids in that school can ride a horse without a saddle and just a rope! (Parent/Guardian 1)

For a number of parents and guardians, it was clear that once the settling in period, regarded by most as at the end of the first school term was completed, then the frequency of communication between children and their family became less of an issue. One of the mothers who had previous experience of children going away to boarding echoed the views of others in community regarding the way communication occurred in saying:

> We don't hear much from the school. He rings sometimes but not all the time. He got a very good report and we were happy with this. Like I say he seems happy there. He says it's a good school and he has the other boys to be friends and he is also made some new friends. (Parent/Guardian 3)

It was clear that for this family, sporadic communication had quickly become the norm. In large part, the trust they had in the school and the presence of older students from community, had quickly built a sense of confidence that things at school were going well. It was a view reinforced by another parent/guardian who stated that:

> Maybe it would be good for us to speak with him or but like I say to you he seems happy and we trust that school because we have a number of our boys who go there. You know his older cousin? He did really well at that school and he finished Year 12. I think he encourages (Year 7 student) and tells him that he needs to stay at school so that he can make his family proud. (Parent/Guardian 5)

When given the opportunity to further discuss questions of communication between home and boarding further, a number of adult participants were keen to vent their frustrations regarding what they saw to be inappropriate conduct and an almost total lack of communication on the part of a number of schools that had traditionally enrolled Lockhart River students and who seemed keen to avoid meaningful and respectful communication, especially when complex or difficult issues arose. One parent expressed this as follows:

> But you know we got other schools they only come here when they want to get kids to sign up to go to their school. They might stop at the guesthouse for a day or so but they never come back and have like a proper talk to us parents. Sometimes we don't even know their names or if they teach our kids or work in the office in that school. (Parent/Guardian 8)

The perceived poor quality of these interactions was associated with a number of events regarding the suspension or exclusion of Lockhart River students. It is clear that there was a strong degree of frustration, anger and disappointment at the way a number of boarding schools had dealt with Lockhart River families when it came to the exclusion or suspension of students:

> I think some schools are worried that if they come here we're going to get angry with them because of the way they just send our kids home when something goes wrong. I think you know what schools we mean eh! We get kids just turn up at the airstrip sometimes. They've been sent home you know, suspended or expelled and families don't even get given a proper reason. (Community/Family Member 3)

When the issue of suspensions and exclusions was discussed further, it became clear that a number of parents and guardian had been placed in situations where they felt that schools had acted in a manner that reflected a very poor grasp of the realities of the cost and logistics involved in travelling to and from Lockhart River. One Parent expressed her frustrations as follows:

> My son, they rang me to say he was suspended and he was being sent home. I asked them if he could get another punishment or be suspended in school. But they said no and they just put him on a bus and sent him to Cairns. They said I would have to pay to fly him home and then pay to fly him and me back for an interview so he could come back to that school. I said do you know how much that costs? That's nearly $2,000 for us both on Skytrans. I don't have that money they didn't care. They said Abstudy don't pay for that travel. They just sent him to Cairns and I was worried so I had to get him to stop with family and they're already full up. He missed nearly a whole term. I was worried the whole time he was in Cairns. (Parent/Guardian 8)

In another interview with one parent/guardian it became clear that the failure of schools to appropriately and respectfully communicate with community was a cause of great stress:

> They said he couldn't stay at that school because he was suspended. They wanted to take him to family in Cairns. But I said no, he can't go there. I don't want him there because there's too much drinking and I don't want him there. They didn't care and they just left him there on Friday before the weekend. He's back home now. He goes to school here. I don't want him back there. (Parent/Guardian 4)

When asked whether family would be seeking another boarding placement for this child, the response indicated clearly that their confidence in the boarding 'system' had been lost:

> He seems pretty happy now. He's not getting into any trouble. He goes to school nearly every day and I don't have to make him go. He gets up nearly every day to go to school. He won a bike for going to school nearly every day and for being good at school I like to have him here with me because there is no one else to look after him. (Parent/Guardian 4)

In this particular instance, the respondent made it clear that the desire for the safety and happiness of the child in her care were prioritized over the desire to seek another boarding opportunity. When the question was asked about a possible return to boarding the response was clear:

> Maybe, you can ask him if he wants to go back. But he didn't like it at (Boarding School) they kicked him out you know they expelled him. I told you that story when you were here last time. He was only there for a couple of weeks and then they expelled him. I wasn't happy because they took him to family in Cairns and said I had to get him home. The family weren't looking after him and so I had to get him home. (Parent/Guardian 4)

When asked about the communication that had taken place between the school and the family in community, the response revealed the significant issues that other adults had referred to regarding how some schools were seen to treat their remote students during periods of difficulty:

> Well they said that they had tried to ring me up that they couldn't get in touch with me. They only spoke to me once and said that they were taking him to family in Cairns because he wasn't behaving well and wasn't going to class. I don't think he had any friends there. There's no Lockhart kids there you see and he finds it hard to make friends so I don't know. Maybe he's better off to stay here in Lockhart. He's a very shy boy stop when he went to that first interview he didn't speak so the principal said he shouldn't go there. That's why he went to (another boarding school) and they kicked him out. I think maybe he gets a bit scared to speak when he goes away and I'm not there. He doesn't speak a lot of English like some of the other kids do. (Parent/Guardian 4)

A number of parents and guardians and clearly articulated their concerns regarding the quality of communication when things were going badly:

> We don't hear much from the school they don't ring us and we don't have things like computers for email. Because we don't hear much from them we think that everything must be okay. We know that when the boys are in trouble or if they're going to be suspended or expelled that the schools will ring us or ring the council or ring the school here in Lockhart to try and tell us what's happening. (Parent/Guardian 9)

It was clear that the issues around a perceived lack of respectful communication between school and family in community were a source of considerable frustration, a frustration that at times bordered on anger and exasperation:

> Those schools say they been trying to ring us but we never get those calls. Then we get a fax message to the Council or the Clinic with an itinerary saying the kid is on the way home. Some of us parents we know what to do but some of these kids are being brought up by their grandmothers or aunties and they don't know what to do sometimes when kids get into trouble or get sent home. That's why we get the Transition ladies to help us but even sometimes they don't know someone has been sent home until they get here! That's why we don't like sending our kids those schools but some kids can't get in anywhere else. (Community/Family Member 2)

This final comment is a powerful one and points very clearly to the fact that for number of families there are very limited choices that are available when it comes to where their children can go for secondary school and it is clear that issues around communication between the school and home are most pronounced in schools regarded by community as schools of 'last resort,' especially when it comes to matters leading to the suspension or exclusion of students. But it is also the case that the frequency and the quality of the communication between boarding schools and parents and guardians is an area of considerable frustration to families in dealing with a wide range of schools and the question of appropriate and respectful communication is one where the parents, guardians and wider Lockhart River community believe that the boarding sector generally could make considerable changes for the better. Good practice is identified by exception and in some instances, the failure to communicate respectfully with parents and guardians exemplifies the considerable power imbalances that exist in the transition space.

4.15 Summary of Research Question 2 (a) and (b)

Student and adult reflections on the lived experience of the transition reveal the complexities inherent in a process that involves the children who are eleven or twelve years old moving from a remote Indigenous community into an environment that is vastly different in terms of factors such geography, culture, language, education and daily routine.

With one exception, seven of the eight children interviewed at the start of 2016 made it through their first semester and first full year of being away from home, but it is clear that were some quite significant variations in the nature of the experience depending on the school or residential facility attended. All spoke of the difficulties involved in that first period of settling into a completely different environment and lifestyle. Boarding, regardless of the particular setting, demands adherence to routines and timelines and it is clear that the educational worlds of Lockhart River and the boarding setting are vastly different. That said, a number students spoke proudly of their capacity to adjust to the demands of harder work, strict routines, different school uniforms for different occasions and a number of other adjustments required. Student responses reveal that level of support they received in adjusting to the changed demands of the transition both from older Indigenous students and from

boarding and school staff appeared to differ, sometimes considerably, across sites as did the quality and variety of the co-curricular programs on offer in both the day school and boarding environments.

For parents and guardians, their experience of the transition was shaped in large part by two things; the feedback they received from their children and perceptions of the quality of the communication between boarding schools and residential facilities and families. While the frequency of the engagement and communication between students and their families tended to 'tail off' after the first few months of the children being away, there can be no doubt that children were very keen to speak of their experiences, especially when they returned home at the end of each term.

Chapter 5: Research Findings Part 2

5.0 5.0 Introduction to Research Question 3 (a). What Do the Children Themselves Believe Are the Factors Which Make for a Successful Transition?

In Chapter 4, student and adult participants articulated the range of emotions that precede the transition to boarding at the beginning of each school year. For students, a mix of nervous anticipation and anxiety were balanced by a sense of excitement at the possible opportunities that would come with the transition. This mix of emotions characterised the period leading up to the move away from community. For adult participants, the period leading up to the transition was again characterized by a mix of emotions: sadness at the prospect of children leaving being balanced by the opportunities that would come with leaving the community. With few exceptions, the experience of the first year of transition was positive for most parents and guardians though significant concerns were raised regarding the quality and frequency of communication between boarding providers and the community.

In this chapter, the views of student and adult participants regarding the factors that make for a successful transition to boarding are presented. The data for this chapter was gathered from interviews conducted in December 2016 when students had completed their first year away from home. As with Chapter 4, student data is presented first and a summary of both student and adult perceptions is presented at the end of the chapter.

In articulating what is meant by 'successful transition' in the minds of twelve year old boys and girls who have spent their first year away from home it is important to let their words speak. As adults we would measure success by using a range of measures or indicators that are normally associated with attaining an agreed set of educational outcomes such as improvements in literacy and numeracy, school attendance, retention year by year, rates of Year 12 completion with an externally recognized form of certification and a post-school destination either into work or further education.

These measures or outcomes were not to the forefront when the students were asked to respond to questions about their experience of being away from home in their first year and why they believed they had been able to navigate their way through a complex and challenging transition period and be successful in completing their first year away from home. A number of the factors that students referred to in the interviews held in December 2016 when students had returned home had previously been spoken of during the interviews held earlier in the year. The student reflections on the things that make for a successful transition provide a very useful basis for those administrators, school leaders, teachers, boarding and support staff who work with students from remote Indigenous communities, especially younger students who are away from home or preparing to leave home for the first time.

5.1 Maintaining Connections and Family Support

It is clear that all transitioning students who participated in this research faced a number of challenges during the course of the year. As the conversations unfolded, it became clear that all these students relied on a sense of connection to family and home, in order to sustain their involvement in education away from home. One participant stated simply:

> I got to spend time with family when they came to visit. I go to go to weekend leave when they came to town here. Sometimes they came with me to watch my football games and then some of the other boys were able to come with me for weekend leave. That was good for me. (Year 6/7 Student 2)

For all students, having a working mobile phone or access to a school or boarding facility phone was critical in keeping the connection with family, especially in the early stages of the transition:

> It was hard at first because we had to hand our mobile phones in every night, but for us, Miss (Boarding Houseparent) was really nice and if we told her we were really wanting to ring home they let us use the boarding phone. But not all of them, some house parents were always mean or cranky and made us just go to bed. (Year 6/7 Student 6)

For a number of students, their response to boarding rules around the handing in of phones demanded a simple response:

> Well I got another phone and sometimes I handed one in that had no credit and so I hid the other one. Most of us girls we got more than one phone. I know one boy he got four phones. The school said we got to get used to being a bit homesick but that's not fair because we like to know what's happening at home. (Year 6/7 Student 7)

For those with younger siblings, the desire to speak regularly with these family members was particularly strong:

> My little brothers and cousins, sometimes they grab the phone and they ring us at school. We hear them and so we want to talk back to them. They don't know where we are so we tell them that we're coming home for holiday. (Year 6/7 Student 3)

For most students, the importance of the connections made by mobile phone cannot be overstated and the use of phones in boarding facilities is a topic of ongoing debate. What is clear is this: for students not boarding at a school or residential facility in Cairns there were no family visits made to students. The logistics and costs associated with visiting children in centres such as Townsville, Brisbane, Rockhampton, Yepoon and Toowoomba made mid-term visits highly problematic and very rare.

It therefore becomes clear that for a number of students, Transition Support Service staff played an important role facilitating communication between boarding and community. In visiting and supporting students in schools, these staff whose work also took them back to community regularly, played a key role in keeping a number of students connected. In speaking with a group of students who were boarding at the same school, the importance of that connection was clear:

> Miss (Transition Support Service staff member), she knows my family back home because she helped all us boys get into his school. She shows us pictures from home when she comes here and sometimes she says I can use her phone to call home. She sends picture of us boys back home and they put those pictures up at the school. (Year 6/7 Student 4)

One other student put it in these terms:

> The Transition ladies they know us from primary school. They came with us for interview when we came down with family. They talk to family here in Lockhart and they talk to the school. We like it when they come to our school……they bring salty plums. (Year 6/7 Student 1)

For all students, the return to community for school holidays was always looked forward to and some students spoke about keeping calendars in their rooms so they could mark off the days until the end of term:

> All us kids from communities, we knew when the itineraries would come out. We get our families to send us money so we can go shopping before we go home. They always want us to buy things to take home and we end up with plenty of bags to carry. We get things for birthdays, especially for our little brothers and sisters. (Older Student 1)

During the interviews held in July and especially in December at the end of their first year away from community, it was clear that a number of students had grown in confidence in terms of their capacity to adjust to the demands of boarding and that a key element here was the maintenance of a strong connection with home. Having observed students in boarding at the end of a school term, in transit through airports as they make their way home or at the moment when they arrive back home in community, it is clear that the connections to home and family are of vital importance.

5.2 The Value of Friendships and Peer Relationships

When asked about what they thought were the things that had made it possible for them to get through their first year of school, students were clear in stating that their friendships were critical. When students were asked at the start of the year how they felt about going away to boarding, nearly all had expressed a strong sense of nervous anticipation at the prospect. What made the prospect seem less daunting was the knowledge that they would be with other Lockhart students, be they their age peers, siblings or older students who had settled into the routine of being away for school.

Looking back on their first year away from home, it was clear that 'sticking together' was an important factor behind a successful year. In the words of one student: "Whenever I used to feel a bit homesick, us boys could always get together. I don't think I would have stayed or gone back at the start of term if we weren't in school together" (Year 6/7 Student 3).

The view was reinforced by one of his peers who stated that:

> I was really nervous about going away and I think all of us were. But now us boys we've got other friends too and not just from Lockhart River. Because the older Lockhart boys were there too we felt a bit safer because they knew all the other boys in boarding too. (Year 6/7 Student 4)

It is clear from the conversations with these students that their initial experiences of being away from home are critical in shaping the nature of their engagement with boarding in the longer term. In that settling period, the importance of a small group of close friends and the support of older students were critical factors in a successful transition. Once students felt settled in their new environment, once they had found a friendship group with whom they felt comfortable, the desire to 'call home' on a regular basis during the course of the term became less pressing.

When students were asked about returning to school for the following year, only one did not want to return to the school they had attended in 2016 (despite the child's mother saying that they would not be allowed to move schools!). Interestingly, the desire was not to remain in Lockhart River but to attend another boarding school. The student stated clearly that:

> My school is a bit slack sometimes and some of the boarding house parents are always grumpy. I see what the other kids get to do at (other boarding school) and I've got friends there too. I'm not going to stay here in Lockhart. It's boring. (Year 6/7 Student 8)

For another student, the value of friendships which continued on from those developed primary school in Lockhart River or those created in that first year away from home was expressed in saying: "Well, if my friends said they weren't going back I wouldn't go back. I don't want to stay here for school, but I don't want to be there on my own" (Year 6/7 Student 8).

The power of these friendships is sometimes best exemplified at the start of each term during student uplift in community. When students travel in small groups they give one another a sense of confidence about the return to school and there is less likelihood of students refusing to take up their scheduled travel or 'bailing up.' Where students are required to travel on their own, they are more likely to refuse to travel.

5.3 Being in a Good School

When students were asked at the end of the year to talk about the best things that happened in their school or boarding facility during their first year away from the community and which had helped them to 'be successful', their responses spoke to three key elements: the building and maintenance friendships which have been discussed previously, the variety of new activities and experiences that some had been exposed to for the first time in their transition to boarding and the quality of the support they had received from a range of staff: teaching and boarding and support staff, in their school.

It is clear that the transition from Lockhart River to boarding was seen by a number of students as opening up a whole range of activities and opportunities that were not available at home. For most of the students who participated in the research it was clear that back in January, as they anticipated the potential difficulties and fears associated with leaving home for the first time, the possibility of engaging in activities and experiences not available in community served to temper to some degree their nervousness and anxiety. As they reflected on the year that had been, they spoke of a range of things that they had enjoyed doing and were looking forward to doing again in the new school year when they entered Year 8; things that the majority of non-remote students take for granted. During one of our discussions, one student reflected the views of a number of students:

> It's so good when we get to go down to the Gold Coast. We all love going to Dream World and Wet n' Wild. The bus trips are so much fun, especially when we get to go with (boarding house parent)) because she lets us play our music and sing and sometimes we get to go with other schools and we meet our friends from there. Most weekends here, we just walk around. (Year 6/7 Student 7)

For both boys and girls, the chance to go shopping on weekend trips, especially at the beginning of a new school term when students returned to school with pocket money, was a highlight of their time away and the following comment about the enjoyment that came with a relaxed routine on weekends is typical:

> We get to sleep in on weekends and when we've finished cleaning our rooms and the dorms we all go up to Cairns Central. They don't let us go on Thursday for night shopping because there's always fights but on Saturday we get to spend a long time there. The house parents let us walk around and sometimes we get to see a movie and meet up with our friends from other schools and get Macca's or KFC! (Year 6/7 Student 2)

The opportunity to engage in other structured activities such as school sport and music was also viewed positively by students who saw these as a release from the demands of the classroom curriculum and an opportunity to engage with their teachers and boarding staff in a setting different to that of the classroom:

> I really like the sport. We don't get to do anything like that here (in Lockhart). It's slack. Only the adults and older boys here get to play proper games like when they go to Weipa or when the other teams come here to play. We get to play against other schools and then we get the chance to see the older boys play. Our coach, he likes us to play and he likes it when we boys come back to school when the term starts. He makes sure we always get boots. (Year 6/7 Student 4)

Other students also spoke of the chance to see 'big events', either for the first time or on a more regular basis as a highlight of their first year away and the following is not an unusual response: "On the weekend we get to go and see the Cowboys play. I got to see JT (Jonathan Thurston, a famous Rugby League player in Queensland) and he came to our school to meet with us" (Year 6/7 Student 6).

When asked about the other things that had been positive about their first year away and had been important in their returning from community to start school with each new term, a number of students made it clear that having teachers, boarding and support staff that they could get on with and who showed that they 'liked them' was a key factor. In one particular school it was clear that a couple of key staff had been given the responsibility of ensuring that the students were given the best possible opportunity of settling into the routines of the classroom and boarding:

> It's good for us because we get to spend a lot of time In Transition class our teacher made she made sure we had the things we needed and she showed us around. She doesn't get mad at us unless we get really slack or naughty. (Year 6/7 Student 1)

For another student who said that the homesickness early on was enough to make him want to return home to community, the relationship built with particular house parents and support staff made a significant difference:

> It was hard for me early. When family came to visit it and I could go on weekend leave it was good but when they dropped me back on Sunday I felt really sad and I just wanted to go home with them. I knew they wouldn't let me and then (house parent) and (house parent) they let me ring home sometimes when I had no credit and were really nice to me. Some of the other house parents they just didn't understand and would get cranky at me if I didn't want to do things. But I finished the year and I'll go back. (Year 6/7 Student 2)

It is clear that students are drawn to those staff who, in the students own words are:

> Not growling all the time and making us feel bad. We sometimes laugh at them and that just makes them get madder and they start yelling so we run away. We just wait for (house parent) to come on duty. We don't mind doing things for her because she's nice and does things with us. (Year 6/7 Student 7)

They are also drawn to staff who know something about them and who have, in some circumstances, taken the time to know something about the community:

> We know (boarding school teacher) has been to Lockhart River and she knows how to talk to us girls and she talks to our family back home. When we first went to that school, she looked after us. We didn't like the way some of the kids spoke to her so we told them not to and so did the older girls. (Year 6/7 Student 6)

It is clear that the ability of teaching and residential staff to acknowledge the circumstances that so often govern how children from a remote Indigenous community (or indeed any boarding student) feel about being so far from home at such an important stage of their lives and then respond accordingly, is a critical factor in determining whether students will succeed or fail in the transition. In the minds of the students, a good school has staff who can relate to them in a respectful and empathetic manner, who treat them fairly and who can display an active interest in where the children come from.

5.4 Introduction to Research Question 3 (b). What Do Parents, Guardians and Community Members Believe Are the Factors Which Make for a Successful Transition?

At the end of the 2016 school year, when all of the students had returned to community at the end of their first year of secondary schooling, parents, guardians and community members were asked the things that they believed were most important in ensuring a successful transition to boarding. A significant number of Lockhart River families have a lot of experience when it comes to sending their children away to boarding and the interviews and discussions held in community in December 2016 revealed very strong feelings about the transition to boarding generally and specifically with regard to the quality of education available to students, both in community and in boarding. While a number of the sentiments had previously been expressed as students prepared to leave the community in January and when they returned at the end of their first semester in July, the December interviews and discussions provided an opportunity for participants to speak at length about a system and a process that promised so much but which at times appeared to have delivered so little in terms of visible outcomes for a significant number Lockhart River's children.

5.5 School Quality: Perceptions of What Makes a 'Good School'

When asked to respond to a question about the things that they believed made for a successful transition to boarding, it was obvious that there was a strong sense of frustration on the part of some parents, guardians and community members regarding what they perceived to be the quality of education available to Lockhart River's students, both in boarding schools and the local school. This was expressed by one adult participant as follows:

> Richard, you've been coming here for a long time now. You know that when you first came here, we had a lot of kids going to (Boarding School) and (Other Boarding School). They

> never used to last long and then they would come back here and do nothing. Just get into trouble. They get into bad habits and then they start to follow the older ones who just do nothing. They get into trouble and then they don't want to work. I know these kids who get kicked out of boarding school need something, but to build a full secondary school is a bad idea. We need our kids to get out to secondary school if they're going to get a good education. (Community/Family Member 2)

The often passionate comments made by a number of parents and guardians regarding the varying quality of the boarding schools that had traditionally enrolled students from Lockhart River, speaks to their strongly held desire to achieve what most adults want for their children: a 'good' school, a 'proper' school. As outlined earlier in Section 4.19.2, the quality of the communication and community engagement between boarding schools and Lockhart River parents and guardians, especially when things went badly in terms of suspensions and exclusions, was a source of great frustration and something that often left those in community feeling powerless and subject to treatment that was both unfair and unjust. For example:

> I know one boy, my little nephew, he got sent home for no reason. Sometimes the schools they just send those kids back home and we don't get any proper reason. Some schools, they do this all the time. (Parent/Guardian 8)

In the eyes of the community, good schools communicate in a respectful and timely manner with parents and guardians and they do not suspend or exclude without following a process and they do not suspend or exclude for reasons that many in community would regard as trivial. The following comment from one frustrated parent accurately sums up the frustration many feel:

> Do the teachers and boarding parents in these schools even know how to look after Aboriginal boys and girls? They need to come here and talk to us, show us who they are and talk to us about looking after our kids. (Community/Family Member 1)

Good schools build relationships with community and they have staff who are familiar with the community context. They have a presence in community outside of visits to do the paperwork required to complete an application for enrolment. It is clear from conversations with community members and from my own observations and experience that there are a number of schools who have previously enrolled Lockhart River students without having spent any time in community. The boarding space generally is one where parents and guardians place an enormous degree of trust in institutions to do the right thing in looking after their children Adult participants spoke of the great variations in the nature and frequency of the interactions between home and school and in a number of instances it is clear that the practices of boarding providers have been a source of considerable frustration and anger, especially when it came to the suspension or exclusion of students. It is this area

that the disparities in the exercise of power in the transition space between boarding institutions and Lockhart River families are most pronounced.

It became clear during the conversations around the idea of good schools, that a significant number of families in Lockhart River had, over time and through their own experience and that of other relatives and community members, formed a clear view about the type of school they wanted for their child. One of the criteria that influenced parental choice of school (where such a choice was available) was around the mix of students that attended the school and the presence of the right number of children from Lockhart River who attended the school. Almost without exception, parents and guardians did not want their children attending a school with a population made up exclusively of other Indigenous students. One guardian who had previously expressed her pride in the way her child had remained in school for all of his first year away stated that:

> It's not good for him to be stuck here like some of the other kids who had to come home. Some just muck up when it's time to go back on the plane but we also know that some of them misbehave really badly at school and they get sent home. He is with a good group of boys and we don't hear any bad things from the school about them. Those Lockhart boys they're pretty close together. This is very important because we hear stories about what happens when many boys and girls from the same community are in schools together. We want them to have friends from home but not too many. (Parent/Guardian 3)

A number of other parents and guardians spoke of their desire to get their children into schools where they would be able to mix with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. One parent reflected on the conversations with her son about how the first year away from home had been and stated:

> We want him to try his best and to be happy. He's got the other Lockhart River boys there and they all seem to get on okay. He also tells me that he's made friends with other boys and not just the Aboriginal boys. (Parent/Guardian 5)

There was a strongly held view in the minds of a number of adult participants in the research that the quality of education in Indigenous only schools was highly problematic and that these were schools of last resort. A parent whose child had been offered a scholarship place in a boarding school known to have an almost exclusively indigenous enrolment at the end of 2015 expressed his view of the offer with great clarity:

> We applied for a scholarship with (scholarship provider Organisation) we waited and waited. When December came around and we hadn't heard anything I rang them and they said that we could get a scholarship for (Year 6/7 Student) to go to (a boarding school with an almost exclusively Indigenous enrolment). I just laughed at them and told them to stick it. I didn't

> even know they gave scholarships to that place. We found her a place at (other boarding school with a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students) at the last minute and she's going really well. (Parent/Guardian 1)

Another parent expressed similar sentiments:

> Two of our kids from here went to that school (Indigenous only boarding school) only because they couldn't get in anywhere else. One of those kids hardly went to school here at all. Both those kids were back here before the end of first term and families didn't even know they got kicked out. We think that's where one of them learned to smoke and break into house. (Community/Family Member 2)

The last line of the comment above generated a degree of laughter during the discussion but it revealed a very deep cynicism on the part of many in the community about how a number of students from the community had been treated in the past by two boarding schools with enrolments that were almost exclusively Indigenous. The feeling was stated starkly as follows: "Our kids come back from those schools with nothing. What's the point of going away?" (Parent/Guardian 6).

It is clear that a number parents and guardians in Lockhart River have, for a long time, experienced considerable frustration and a sense of powerlessness when it comes to the education of their children both in community and in the transition to boarding. They have a very clear view about what constitutes a good, or proper school for the children in their care.

5.6 Transition Support Service: "The Transition Ladies"

The transition to boarding is a complex space for students and for their parents and guardians. The students themselves have to navigate their way through a transition across geography, climate language, culture, learning style and a range of other factors, all at a time when they are in the developmentally vulnerable and problematic phase of early adolescence.

For parents and guardians, extended families and the broader community there is the anxiety and sadness of separation and the range of conflicting emotions this invariably brings. There is also the bureaucratic or administrative element of the transition: the collection of identity documents including birth certificates, the application for Abstudy, the application and enrolment process for finding a boarding school or residential facility placement and the management of interview travel.

For a number of parents, guardians and community members involved in these processes it is the support of staff from the Queensland Education Department Transition Support Service who make the transition possible. If there is another dominant phrase to emerge from this research to go alongside that of "it's sad, but there's nothing for them here," it would be "the Transition Ladies."

As has been stated previously, the importance of the work done by the Transition Support Service in Lockhart River in supporting the transition to boarding was a common theme at all stages of the research process. In the minds of many in the community there is a strong view that without the work done by the Transition Support Service in Lockhart River, at airports through Queensland and in boarding facilities throughout Queensland, many families and students would not find or be able to sustain an enrolment. It is point expressed forcefully as follows:

> OK, we know some kids won't make it in boarding school but this is where the work of TSS is invaluable. The system is too complex for many of our families to deal with on their own. Some families know their way around the system by now but remember that quite a few of our kids are being brought up by grandparents and other older family members. Dealing with Abstudy is just too hard for them to do without the support that TSS give. Without the work done by TSS we wouldn't be getting our kids into the better boarding schools. (Parent/Guardian 1)

Parents and guardians were keen to articulate how the support of the Transition Support Service was an important factor in supporting them to find a boarding placement for their children: "Well, Abstudy don't help us much. They should make it easier. The Transition ladies help us to understand Abstudy. Abstudy should come here and we can finish things quickly" (Parent/Guardian 8).

The practical support provided by TSS staff to Lockhart River parents and guardians throughout the Abstudy application process, the completion of school applications and enrolment forms and the support provided during orientation visits was referred to almost continually during discussions with parents and guardians in the period leading up to the students heading off to boarding school.

When the discussion turned to the fact that there had been talk that the Transition Support Service would cease to operate at the end of the 2016 school year, a number of those present expressed serious concerns that some families would struggle to manage key elements of the transition process without the level of service that the community had come to expect. One parent put it succinctly:

> They'd be fucking stupid to pull that service. We know that TSS are there at Cairns airport and in Brisbane and we know they go and visit the kids in school. They come here to help get kids ready to travel to school and they know the community. Education don't come here and speak to us. If they did we'd tell them about the work the TSS do for our families and for our kids. (Parent/Guardian 1)

While a number of long-serving staff employed with the Transition Support Service left the service at the end of 2016, including the Manager and a number of other experienced staff, the service

did continue into 2017 and at the time of writing the service continues to operate, having engaged a number of new staff. In February 2017, after the data gathering phase of this research had been concluded, I took up the role as manager of the Transition Support Service. It was clear that for parents and guardians, especially grandparents and aunties and uncles who had taken on the responsibility of raising children, that the work of the Transition Support Service was particularly important:

> It's hard for us to go and speak to the boarding schools on our own. We don't know much about the boarding schools…….we don't know what to say to them, especially when we go for an interview or when our kids are in trouble. The boarding schools don't come and talk to us here and it's hard if we have to go there and talk to them. And when they try to ring us, we don't know what happens there. It's good for us and for the kids if the TSS ladies can help us. (Parent/Guardian 7)

The point was reinforced further by a community member who had younger nieces and nephews in boarding school and who had previously played a role in helping support children from Lockhart River to find a boarding placement:

> My nanna, she used to speak to me about growing up on the mission. She didn't get to see life outside so now it's hard for her when she's got to look after little ones. It's really hard for the older ones here in community looking after kids going away to boarding school. They've got poor English. They don't understand school processes and Abstudy is really hard for them. That's why we need TSS to help out. A lot of the older people, they don't know about the different boarding schools. Yeah, it's really hard for them. (Community/Family Member 3)

The role played by Transition Support Service staff in working with the boarding schools through visiting students and brokering conversations between school staff and parents and guardians was seen as particularly important in the building of relationships between particular boarding schools and the Lockhart River community. When community members speak of finding 'good schools' for their children, they also speak of the work done by staff from the Transition Support Service in building and brokering relationships between school and community:

> We know that Miss (Community Liaison Officer from a boarding school) talks to the Transition ladies. They keep an eye on our kids. We know that. They know our kids and they tell us what happens there at school. We like to show them around when they come here. (Parent/Guardian 3)

It was clear from the discussions held at all stages of the interview process that the work done by the staff from the Transition Support Service was held in high regard and was predicated on the development of long term relationships between Transition Support staff and students and families.

Parents and guardians knew that Transition Support Service staff would work with students and families in the period leading up to the move away from community to boarding, would provide support as students and their escorts travelled to and from boarding and would be available to visit students in their boarding placements. One parent expressed it succinctly:

> My daughter who's going to finish Year 12 this year, she knows the Transition ladies in Townsville really well. They've been there since she started in Year 8. We know that when her little sister goes to that school that the ladies will look after her too. (Parent/Guardian 6)

The importance of parents and guardians feeling a degree of confidence in the fact that their children would be looked after was a critical factor in in shaping their responses to the question around the factors that made for a successful transition. The transition to boarding is potentially a time of greatly heightened vulnerability for students and their parents and guardians. Lessening that perception of vulnerability can be a key element in maximizing the prospect of a successful transition and therefore allowing access to a quality and comprehensive secondary education.

5.7 Family Interest and Support: "These Kids Were Ready to Go"

While parents, guardians and community members had expressed their concerns regarding the young age at which children were now required to leave community (at the end of Year 6 instead of Year 7) in order to access a quality secondary education, there was a clearly articulated view that the good work done by the Transition Support Service and Lockhart River State School in working with families and students to prepare students for the transition at the start of 2016 would give students a strong chance of success. Indeed, most adult participants in the research expressed the view that the preparation for the transition to boarding was an essential factor in giving children the best possible chance of success. In addition to the work of the Transition Support Service, adults spoke of a number of other key factors, one of the most important of these being attendance at school during the primary years. One parent of a transitioning student expressed it thus:

> Look, I know he seems young, but we've made sure he's had good attendance at primary school and he and a number of these other kids have been pretty well behaved at school. That's why we think they've got a place in a good school. Some of the other kids, well they're only got a place at (Indigenous only boarding school) because they're the only ones who would take them, and the ones staying here for secondary, we all know they won't last long. They just aren't used to going to school. (Parent/Guardian 1)

Indeed, the relationship between attendance and behavior in the primary school years and the chances of success in the transition to boarding was discussed at length in a number of the discussions and interviews held during the December 2016 phase of the data gathering. For one parent whose child was to attend the same school as a number of her siblings had done, the link was simple:

> I made sure my kids all went to school. They only missed when they were sick. They know how to behave in school because we tell them and their older brothers and sisters who've been away to school tell them as well. We in this community can tell which kids don't go to school here. When they go away they only get to go to schools like (Boarding Schools) and they muck up when they get there and get kicked out. We feel sorry for these kids because they don't know about going to school every day. They won't get into a good school and it's the parents to blame who didn't make them go to school. (Parent/Guardian 6)

The views expressed here again indicate very clearly that for parents and guardians, a successful transition is in large part determined by a child being able to access what is perceived as a good school. In order to access a good school, it essential that a student have a sound record of attendance and behavior, a record that is invariably driven or determined by the degree of adult engagement or agency in the education space.

In short, parents and guardians with the requisite degree of agency or capital, the confidence and the ability to ensure the children in their care have a successful experience of primary school are more likely to be able to access a secondary school viewed by the community as a good school or a proper school for the children in their care. Having accessed a school placement, these parents and guardians were more likely, in spite of the barriers posed by distance, to maintain a close interest in the education and well-being of their children who had left the community. They saw this as an important factor in keeping their children in school:

> Well, we went down to his school with the TSS ladies for the interview at the school and we met with the Principal and some of the teachers…we were very happy that he was accepted there. We still ring him and ask him how he's going, but you know he doesn't tell us too much. When he graduates and finishes Year 12, he knows we'll go down there. (Parent/Guardian 5)

The difficulties in maintaining connections, especially for some older guardians, were highlighted during the course of a number of conversations:

> My kids know that we're going to going to talk to the school. They also know that we'll find out if they misbehave or do the wrong thing. But it's too hard for some of the older ones who've been bringing up some of these kids. Some of them have poor English and they don't understand the schools and their processes. So sometimes they find out from the Transition ladies and sometimes we pass the phone around so they can talk to their kids. (Parent/Guardian 6)

It was a point further reinforced as follows:

> Parents have to keep supporting the kids who go away, even if it does seem a bit hard. Some parents don't like talking to schools because they worry that they don't have good English. Some of these parents they come to me because they know that I can talk to schools with them. But see, that's why we need the teachers in these schools to come here. They need to come out to community because sometimes our families can get shamed when they go to the schools and then they don't want to get involved. (Community/Family Member 2)

Another parent commented that:

> Some parents they think that once the kid is on the plane that the work's done…that now it's the boarding school's job. That makes it hard and sometimes those kids are the ones that want to come home early. (Parent/Guardian 1)

It is apparent that within the community, the ability and confidence of parents and guardians to engage in the process of building connections with the schools attended by their children varied considerably. A number of parents and guardians have over a number of years built a skill set which allows them to engage with a degree of confidence in the process of finding and sustaining a boarding placement of their choice, even if, as is the case on some occasions, they have to argue for their rights and the rights of their children around suspension and exclusion practices.

The issue here is that for children from family environments where the skill set required for the engaging with education both in community or in the transition to boarding space is problematic, potentially reflected in poor attendance and/or problematic behavior, the possibility of securing and sustaining a placement in a quality secondary boarding school environment is minimal at best. For those children, the transition space is likely to be one where educational disadvantage may be driven deeper and become further entrenched with the concomitant exposure to more generalized and potentially lifelong disadvantage. It is here that the theories outlined in Section 2.5 which focus on the impact of differentials in economic, human and social capital and subsequent ability to exert a sense of agency take on such significance.

5.8 Summary of Research Questions 3 (a) and (b)

For students reflecting on their first year away from community friendships, especially those with other Lockhart River students, are of fundamental importance in shaping their experience of the transition. Those friendships with their age peers and with older students provided a degree of certainty and reassurance, especially in the early stages of the transition and it was not uncommon during interviews and discussions for students to reference that fact that if they did not have other students return with them at the start of each term, then they would be highly unlikely to take up their travel.

Closely related to the sense of security created by the friendships, students were also clear in their view that the maintenance of a strong sense of connection back to community was an important factor in shaping a positive experience of transition. The support provided to students, be it by parents and guardians back in community, boarding and residential staff or from staff from the Transition Support Service was seen as critical in shaping a positive view of transition and it is here that students were, like many adult participants, able to articulate the notion of the 'good school.' Students who could identify specific examples of supportive residential and day school environments were far more likely to speak favorably of their experience of transition and demonstrate a sense of connection and belonging to their new school. They were then far more likely to want to return to that school.

Adult participants in the research were also very keen to speak of the notion of a 'good school' or a 'proper school' as significant factor in determining the success of the transition to boarding both in terms of the critical early period in Year 7 and the longer term sustainability of a boarding placement through to the completion of Year 12. In the minds of adult participants in this research, a 'good school' is one that exhibits the following characteristics: it is a school that enrolls Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students, it has boarding and residential staff who understand the Lockhart River context and who have demonstrated that understanding through their physical presence in community, it welcomes parents and guardians when they have the opportunity to visit, it communicates in an honest and respectful manner with parents and guardians even when difficult conversations around suspensions or exclusions must be dealt with.

The notion of the support provided to students and families in the transition to boarding is also regarded by adult participants as a key factor in determining the success or otherwise of making and sustaining the transition to secondary education away from home. The support provided to students by their parents and guardians, by other students, especially older siblings or older Lockhart River students, by teaching and residential staff and by the Transition Support Service are all regarded as vital in giving students the opportunity to succeed. The work of the Transition Support Service in the period leading up to students leaving the community at the end of Year 6, in visiting students in their boarding schools and residential facilities and in supporting students and family members travelling to and from school is regarded as particularly important and was referenced by parents and guardians at all stages of the research process.

The interviews conducted with students, both those transitioning for the first time at the start of 2016 and those who were now well established in their boarding placements, parents, guardians and community members revealed much about the complexity of the transition to boarding. Adults in the community take great pride in the achievements of their children who leave the community to attend secondary school and they want the very best for their children.

But it is clear that the ‘system’ presented at times what are seen to be an insurmountable set of difficulties that make ongoing engagement with education outside of the community quite problematic. Most students, prior to and during their first year away from home, speak positively about their experience in going away but again, maintaining that engagement throughout the secondary years of schooling has for many students proven to be highly problematic.

Chapter 6: Analysis and Discussion

6.0 Introduction

In the preceding two chapters, the data regarding the experience of the transition to boarding and the factors that make for a successful transition for student and adult participants was presented. The data conveys the complexity of the transition and provides representation of a range of very diverse views regarding the transition to boarding. In this chapter I will present an analysis of the key themes that have emerged from the data and discuss these themes in the context of what has become an area of intense research interest and the focus of a range of significant government reports, reviews and inquiries that were referenced in Chapter 2.

At the start of the 2015 school year, two cohorts of students left Lockhart River and made the transition to boarding schools or residential facilities in cities and regional centres across Queensland. There were the first cohort of students leaving at the end of Year 6 and the last cohort of students to make the transition at the end of Year 7. A total of 16 students left the community to start secondary school at the start of 2015, seven entering Year 7 and nine going into Year 8. A small number of students from both cohorts did not make the transition, having failed to secure a place in a boarding school or residential facility for the 2015 school year. Poor school attendance and issues around behavior during their primary school years were the most significant reasons for not securing a boarding placement.

All of the students who made the transition at the end of Year 6 and Year 7 completed their first year of secondary education away from home. That is, no students returned to community prematurely having been either excluded by their schools, self-excluding or being withdrawn by parents and guardians in their first year away.

This was an exceptional result. It is almost unheard of for an entire cohort in any remote community to make it through their first year of school away from home, let alone for two cohorts to achieve this in their first year. During the periods in which the interviews for this research were held, it was clear that the community had the same expectations of success for the 2016 cohort who had secured a place at a boarding school or residential facility. Again, it is important to note that not all of the 2015 Year 6 cohort had been able to secure a place in boarding for 2016 and that a small number of students were either to remain in community and attend the alternative secondary program at Lockhart River School or make a late application in search of a boarding placement. Given the competitive nature of selection for boarding places in some of the secondary facilities regarded by many adults and students in the community as good schools, late applications would most likely only be successful for facilities regarded by the Lockhart River community as potentially problematic. In short, family and community expectations were high that the transition experience of this cohort

would replicate the experience of the previous year's students in starting their secondary education well away from home.

As the year unfolded and participants in the research reflected on the experience of leaving community it was apparent that there was no single experience of the transition to boarding for students, for their families or for the community of Lockhart River. The transition is complex and the responses of Lockhart River children, parents, guardians and community members reflect both a diverse range of experiences and the complexity that comes with leaving a remote Indigenous community at the age of eleven or twelve and travelling often great distances to begin a secondary education in an environment that bears little resemblance to the environment back home in community. Diversity and complexity notwithstanding, there are a number of interrelated themes that have emerged from this research that appear to shape and characterize the transition experience for both adults and for children.

6.1 Navigating a Complex Space: The Forms of Capital and the Transition to Boarding

It is difficult to imagine two more diametrically opposed worlds than those of the remote Indigenous community and that of the traditional western boarding school. In making the transition to boarding, most Lockhart River students encounter an environment that is far removed from that in which they have grown up and gone to primary school. While not all Lockhart River students attend boarding schools and residential facilities similar to those that feature in much of the recent research in the space, some do and even those who attend facilities that do not carry labels such as 'elite' or 'prestigious' encounter a world very different to that they leave behind. Many of their parents and guardians, a number of whom have had experience as a child themselves in boarding or who have had older children attend boarding, also encounter a space that presents a set of considerable and sometimes insurmountable challenges.

In articulating the motivation(s) behind this research and determining the philosophical and methodological constructs which underpinned the way in which the research was conducted, I started from the premise that for Lockhart River community and indeed for a number of other very remote Indigenous communities in which I had lived and worked or had direct or indirect experience, the transition to boarding space was one in which there existed very significant differentials in terms of the exercise of power between the 'system' and those who the system is intended to support. In this context, the workings of key elements of a Western, non-Indigenous system such as government policies, programs and practices best exemplified by a complex and heavily bureaucratic Abstudy program and the practices of a range of boarding providers, act in combination to determine the course and nature of the transition for students and their families and communities. In short, the transition to boarding space is one where the imbalance in power between those of the dominant culture and those who sit outside of that culture is clearly evident. The 'we let 'em go' exclusions that

were described in Section 1.2.4 went unchallenged at the time because the students and their families impacted by the exclusions felt powerless to do anything about them.

The transition to boarding is intended to enhance and also transform the lives of individual student's lives through allowing access to a quality and comprehensive secondary education. The notion of boarding creating transformative opportunities for children from remote Indigenous communities was examined in detail in in Section 2.4.2 and for Indigenous leaders such as Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton the notion sits at the core of their support for quality boarding. It is also intended that the young people who go away will, on their return, make a very positive contribution to the well-being of their communities through the application of the knowledge and skills they have acquired while away from home. This is the view that sits at the core of the human and social capital approaches to discussions promoting the benefits of a boarding school education examined earlier in Section 2.5. But what this research reveals and what other contemporary research into the space discussed earlier in Section 2.4.2 and Section 2.5 also shows is that the transition can, for many children and their families, be highly problematic. It is problematic in the context of this research because of the clear disparities in the possession and utility of appropriate forms of capital between students and families in Lockhart River and the boarding providers and bureaucratic systems that support and deliver the education not available at home. In effect, the generalized disadvantage which is meant to be ameliorated through the transition to boarding is, for a significant number of remote Indigenous students and the families that support them, potentially reinforced as they struggle to navigate their way through a world which is very different to that of their home. It is not a level playing field.

The potential suitability of the application of Bourdieu's constructs of capital, habitus and field to the transition to boarding space for Indigenous students from remote communities was discussed in depth earlier in this dissertation but it is important to restate here that:

> The question as to how useful Bourdieu's position is for us today is not about whether the 1960's and 1970's French model applies completely to Britain, America or anywhere else in the present day. Instead, the question involves asking how useful his ideas are in general in helping us to understand our own contexts. (Inglis & Hughson, 2003, p. 189)

In theorizing the importance of the exercise of cultural capital and other forms of capital in perpetuating the status quo in western education, a status quo which in this context largely sees students from remote Indigenous communities as potentially vulnerable and sitting at the margins, Bourdieu's model provides a structure which allows us to ask questions about how boarding schools assign an appropriate value to essentially 'non-Western' forms of capital such as the linguistic and cultural capital in the form of knowledge and practice of Indigenous culture that remote Indigenous students bring to their new secondary school environment. If the only forms of capital that are prized

are those of the dominant school culture, then many students from remote Indigenous communities will always be at a considerable disadvantage in terms of their ability to engage in a sustained and meaningful way with an education system that is a world away from the environment in which they have grown up. It is in their home environment, the remote Indigenous community of Lockhart River, in which they have formed their habitus, the set of an individual's 'embodied dispositions manifested in the way they view the world and which develops from the beginning of life in relation to the social milieu of their home and family life' (Hart, 2019, p. 586). The habitus of the child who leaves Lockhart River at the end of Year 6 will, most likely, be at odds with the key aspects of the boarding environment. The disconnect between the habitus of the remote Indigenous student transitioning to boarding and the school environment into which they are placed and the value, or lack thereof, ascribed by schools to the various forms of capital that Indigenous students bring to their new environment is a recurring theme in research conducted by O'Bryan (2016) into the experience of Indigenous students in elite boarding schools in Melbourne. In recounting the experiences of two students who went on to tertiary studies she states that, "Both of these young people emerged from university benefitting from what Stahl (2015, p. 349) describes as a counter-habitus, replete with the generative capacity to create new responses that allow it to 'contest, resist and possibly transcend social and economic conditions (p. 33)".

The criticisms of Bourdieu's work on the basis that it is essentially deterministic and 'reproductive' (Harker, 1984) and by Yosso (2005) that it diminishes that varied forms of capital that 'People of Color' bring to an education space which is often seen to be characterized by the perpetuation of disadvantage, are challenged by the experiences recounted in O'Bryan's research outlined above and fail to acknowledge that:

> His (Bourdieu's) work is one of the few coherent accounts of the central role that schools have in reproducing social and cultural inequalities from one generation to the next, while at the same time, I will argue, allowing for human agency. He achieves this through an exploration of the tension between the conservative aspect of schooling (the preservation of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next), and the dynamic innovative aspect (the generation of new knowledge. (Harker, 1984, p. 117)

It became apparent during the course of this research that within the Lockhart River community there were individuals and families who had previous experience of their children or other family members of going away to board and who, in working with agencies such as the Transition Support Service, had built a body of social and cultural capital, in particular with respect to a knowledge of how 'the system' worked that supported the attendance and engagement of their children with Lockhart River State School which in turn supported the enrolment of their children into future school environments that enjoyed a generally positive reputation in community. That is they

had, in Harker (1984) words, 'built new knowledge' and had expressed that knowledge in the form of social capital which has considerable utility in the transition to boarding space.

For children from families possessed of both lower social capital in terms of limited or problematic engagement with the world of non-Indigenous secondary schooling and a potentially poor record of attendance and behavior, the likelihood was that, even with the support and advocacy of the Transition Support Service, it was likely that securing a quality boarding placement would be problematic.

Through engaging community members in discussions around attendance and behavior, it was clear by the end of 2015 that a small number of students would struggle to be accepted into their school of first choice. This became a fact of the 2016 transition: children from family environments possessed of higher levels social capital and in some cases economic capital as expressed through high and well supported levels of primary school attendance, positive perceptions of their children's classroom behavior both in Lockhart River and in the future boarding environment and confidence and fluency in Standard Australian English (SAE), were able to enroll their children into schools regarded by families and the broader community as 'good schools' while those children from families with minimal social capital as exemplified in the criteria above had no option but to enroll their children in schools regarded as potentially problematic, primarily because they were regarded by community schools as catering almost exclusively to Indigenous students and having very poor levels of engagement with parents and guardians back in community.

In large part, this is where 'the churn' comes from: potentially vulnerable students are placed into residential and classroom environments with student populations with large numbers of other vulnerable students. They encounter little in the way of success in an environment which at times replicates the problematic social environment of the communities from which they have come. These boys and girls consequently find themselves in situations which ultimately place them at a greater risk of exclusion, indefinite suspension (which ultimately becomes and exclusion because the student(s) is/are sent home without a paid return airline ticket) or having their enrolments 'cancelled'.

There are a number of examples from the interview material of parents and guardians in this study feeling powerless in the transition, especially when it came to the quality of the communication between the boarding provider and family in community regarding the suspension or exclusion. Given the issues around distance, barriers around language and the costs involved when parents and guardians were asked to pay for the return travel to community for a suspended student (Abstudy does not pay the costs involved in sending students back to community who are asked to serve a lengthy external suspension) adults felt that there had been many occasions when they lacked the ability to question the way they felt their children had been treated In perhaps the worst example of this, a student participant in this research was excluded from a school and placed in the care of family

living close by without the knowledge of the guardian while arrangements were made for the child to be returned to Lockhart River.

This particular example raises a number of serious questions about where the transition to boarding school 'sits' in relation to playing a key role in addressing or redressing entrenched disadvantage. In the Indigenous scholarship space for example, (no students from the 2016 Lockhart River cohort were on scholarships) the vast majority of places in elite or high performing schools are awarded to students from urban, regional and rural areas to students from families generally possessed of higher levels of the dominant society's cultural, social and economic capital. Scholarship applications are long and onerous and demand high levels of mastery in written Standard Australian English (SAE) on the part of students and their parents and guardians.

If education, in this case the provision of secondary boarding, is to play a role in addressing disadvantage and giving each new generation a range of opportunities not available to previous generations, then it is vital that the greatest degree of resourcing and the highest levels of support are directed at students at greatest risk. That is, places in 'the best schools' and 'good schools' should be awarded as much on the basis of need as awarded on the basis of merit or privilege. The transition to boarding space should not be one that further drives the perpetuation of entrenched disadvantage.

6.1.1 "There's Nothing for Them Here": The Quality of Local Schooling and Boarding Creating Opportunity Outside of Community

In a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry into Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students made on behalf of Ninth One, prominent researcher John Guenther stated bluntly that:

> Secondary education attainment is extremely low in remote communities. This has a threefold potential negative impact. First it limits employment and further training outcomes. This in turn means that for younger peers there is no positive outcome from schooling evident, impacting then on both their engagement and their attendance. Finally, many young people will be very young parents and their support for their children's learning will be influenced by their own low education attainment. Successful engagement with ongoing learning is critical to improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. (Ninti One, 2016, p. 6)

This research gives voice to the view from within community that remaining in community for the years of secondary education is highly problematic and it is highly problematic for two key reasons. The first relates to the quality of local schooling and the second relates to the social factors in community that negatively impact on participation in education. The phrase, "it's sad, but there's nothing for them here," was repeated on multiple occasions when parents, guardians and community members were asked how they felt about their children having to leave Lockhart River at the end of

Year 6. In the minds of adults and a number of the older students who participated in this research, Lockhart River State School cannot deliver a program of secondary instruction that has the credibility befitting that of what they know to be or what they perceive to be, a real or proper secondary school. There was not a single adult participant in the research who believed that their children could access an education program in community that could compare with that offered outside. The view that "there's nothing for them here" reflects clearly the view of adults that a quality comprehensive secondary education can only be accessed through going away.

In reflecting the community view that leaving for secondary school is perceived by adults in Lockhart River to be the only way to access a quality and comprehensive secondary education and thus create opportunities for young people not available at home, this research mirrors that conducted by Mander in Western Australia where 'the current research revealed that student, parent and staff informants believed it was still necessary for Aboriginal people to leave their home community if they were to access an equitable standard of secondary education' (Mander, 2012, p. 247). The community held perception of the quality of the education available in remote Indigenous communities and of the opportunities to be created for young Indigenous people by participating in education away from home is also a recurring theme in further research conducted into student perspectives on the transition to boarding in Western Australia by Mander et al. (2015), which revealed that the majority of participants 'believed their local school did not have adequate resources and facilities such as classrooms, computers, desk and chairs, sporting ovals and equipment and they did not provide access to desired course options in Years 11 and 12' (p. 28). Mander (2015) and McDonald et al. (2018) reinforce further the strongly held community view that in Western Australia, the quality of education available in a major city such as Perth is far superior to that available in smaller regional, rural or remote centres. The problematic nature of the quality of local secondary schooling and the notion of the transition to boarding creating opportunities for young Indigenous boys and girls is a recurring theme in research conducted in number of other jurisdictions including that done by Hunter (2014) and Lloyd (2018) in the Northern Territory, Benveniste (2016) in South Australia and Bobongie (2017) and Rogers (2016), who worked with students in Queensland.

The notion that the transition creates opportunities that are not available in Lockhart River does not rest solely with the adults in community. Students, both those who had left the community for the first time in 2016 and those who had made considerable progression through their secondary education away from home, referenced secondary education in Lockhart River as 'slack.' In reflecting on their first year of secondary education away from home, student participants spoke of the wide variety of experiences that they had been exposed to in their first year away from home that were simply not available at home.

6.1.2 "There's nothing for Them Here": Social Factors Impacting on Participation in Education in Community

Parents, guardians and community members repeatedly expressed very real concerns that the prevalence of a range of social problems in community made it virtually impossible for secondary school aged students to build a life that would not involve intermittent attendance at school, premature access to alcohol and cannabis and involvement in 'humbug': the cycle of fighting, anti-social behavior, early pregnancy and aimlessness that was a source of such frustration to adults in the community.

The prevailing social issues discussed by adult participants in this research and the negative impact they have on the lives of the community's young people are a recurring theme in the recent literature around Indigenous boarding but it is also clear in the minds of many young Indigenous students who have gone away to boarding that there are elements of community life that can at times be highly problematic. Mander (2015) states that for several participants in his research, "the prospect of contending with problematic social issues that they perceived pervaded their local secondary school context – such as alcoholism, drug use, family feuding and gang membership - was more daunting than studying away from home" (pp. 28–29).

A participant in Mander's doctoral research into the boarding school experience of Aboriginal boys attending exclusive boarding schools in a major metropolitan centre stated that:

> I see lot of boys at home they're not doing great. They've got kids or they're messing around with girls (sexually active) or been banged up (juvenile detention centre) or they've got no jobs and they've got a wife (term often used to depict a long-term girlfriend) and I just look at them and think if I hadn't gone away I'd end up like this. (Student Informant 12, in Mander, 2012, p. 145)

During the course of my visit to Lockhart River in December 2016 there were several episodes of very public fighting between groups of teenage girls and younger women. On one occasion as I walked to the community store there was a violent altercation in progress between two groups of girls occurring just across the road. At the time, I spoke with a student not involved in the research who I knew to be returning to a boarding school to do Year 12 in 2017 and asked her what it was that kept her going back to school at the start of each new term and each New Year. She responded with a broad sweep of her arm in the direction of the fighting and screaming and said simply: "Because I don't want to be like them!"

Issues around the perceived poor quality of remote secondary education and the prevalence of a range of serious social issues that impact on children's ability to engage meaningfully and regularly are further compounded by the reality that successful engagement in secondary education studies, especially those in the senior Years 11 and 12 demands the completion of homework and assignment

tasks outside of normal school hours. For students from remote Indigenous attending boarding schools and residential facilities, structured homework and study programs, access to tutors and teachers and access to information technology resources are a given, as they are for the majority of Australian students attending day schools. For the vast majority of students living in remote Indigenous communities such as Lockhart River none of these things are a given. Rates of overcrowding in publicly supplied housing make setting aside a space for uninterrupted study very difficult and Lockhart River has internet access and availability which, at the time this research was conducted in 2016, was both intermittent and unreliable and this is a situation which has continued to the present. Community reports produced by the Queensland Government Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP) indicate that 33.9% of Lockhart River's population reside in households regarded as overcrowded, 37.7% of dwellings have access to the internet and 44.7% of dependent children live in families where no parent is employed (Queensland Government, 2018).

In short, even were the best of secondary programs to be made available in Lockhart River, they would in all probability not be accessed with sufficient regularity because the social preconditions for accessing education in a regular and meaningful way do not exist; a range of social factors would, most likely, result in consistently low and sporadic rates of secondary school attendance and consequently low achievement. Research conducted in the remote Northern Territory context around the influence of a range of social factors on education speaks of the pressing need to understand fully where remote education, including the transition of children to boarding, sits in relationship to a range of other fields. Silburn, Mackenzie, Guthridge, Li and Li, (2017) speak to the importance of understanding the range of non-school factors that impact on remote education in stating that:

This is why it is essential that policies, services and programs to improve Indigenous education are based on a reliable and proper understanding of the complex interplay between individual, environmental and social forces shaping the lives of Indigenous children. Most of the policy discourse on improving outcomes in Indigenous education is focused on what is happening within schools, for example the quality of teaching in remote schools, the merits of different instructional approaches, the importance of setting high expectations and the ways in which parent engagement and student motivation can be improved through school leadership. (p.93).

Lockhart River mirrors a number of Indigenous communities across remote Australia where significant investments in secondary school education have been made but where attendance remains well below the levels required to achieve at a satisfactory level. While rates of secondary school attendance in remote Queensland attendance are not publicly available, no secondary program offered in remote Cape York communities attracts an average daily rate of attendance that allows for successful and meaningful engagement with a secondary program that offers the same degree of rigor as that which could be accessed in major regional or urban centre. In living memory, no student has

completed Year 12 while enrolled at school in Lockhart River with any recognized form of certification. The adults who participated in this research are well aware that to remain in community for secondary education or to return to secondary education having been excluded from boarding effectively means the end of an education pathway, especially a pathway that will allow for the completion of secondary studies with any form of recognized accreditation such as a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE).

A similar situation exists in the Northern Territory and remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia and South Australia. In Wadeye (Port Keats) in the Northern Territory for example, a community with which I have had direct professional experience, well over $10 million has been directed to the construction of secondary school facilities to offer a range of academic and vocational programs. Daily secondary attendance generally sits at below 20% of the secondary school aged population and 'nonattendance at school has become the social norm' (Taylor, 2010, p.35). Up until 2020, when 7 students completed a modified Year 12 program, no student from Wadeye had completed Year 12 with a recognized form of external certification in community in the preceding decade, perhaps even longer given the paucity of retention and completion data. Recent research conducted by Lloyd in the Northern Territory compared remote data from that jurisdiction with data from the 2016 United Nations Global Education Monitoring Report and concluded that "some Indigenous people living in the remotest parts of the Northern Territory have some of the lowest completion rates in Australia, comparable to some of the lowest in the world" (Lloyd, 2019, p.17).

If the social preconditions necessary to support students accessing to education, especially secondary education, do not exist in community, then perceptions around the quality of local education offerings become largely irrelevant. Parents and guardians will support the transition of their children to boarding schools and residential facilities because it gives the children a chance to escape the myriad negative social influences that impact on the lives of young adolescents and also allow access to a quality and comprehensive education and a range of associated opportunities, such as sport, music and a whole range of extra-curricular activities that are the norm in well-established secondary school programs. Participation in a range of potential employment and training opportunities open up to children who transition successfully into secondary school away from home, including pathways into tertiary education and the subsequent employment opportunities that follow that would never be available were they to remain in community. Here it is worth repeating influential Indigenous advocate Noel Pearson's assertion that, "In Cape York Peninsula, no Aboriginal tertiary graduates have come from local public secondary schools. It is on this past practice-its successes as well as its failures-that we base our policy in Cape York Peninsula: scholarships to high-quality, high-expectations secondary schools down south" (Pearson, 2011, p.298-299 b.).

6.2 Boarding School and Residential Facility Quality

Given that both the perceived quality of primary and secondary education as problematic and the adverse influence of a range of social factors on education participation in Lockhart River, it is in large part logical that the default to boarding has become the accepted norm in the minds of many in the community. But what this research has revealed is that for the community of Lockhart River, the transition to boarding, especially in the period leading up to the conduct of this research in 2016, has not necessarily guaranteed access to a quality secondary education for all children.

In Chapter One, detailed reference was made to the situation experienced in 2011 by a group of Indigenous boarding students, mostly from remote and very remote communities across northern Australia, who were sent home without what could be objectively described as just cause or without any apparent explanation to parents and guardians by staff in leadership positions at an Indigenous-only boarding school near Cairns. The exclusion of these students coincided with a number of visits I made to Lockhart River in 2010 and 2011 to support the roll-out of the Australian Government Parent and Community Engagement (PaCE) strategy in partnership with the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and the Puuya Foundation. During the course of these visits I attended a number of meetings, including the Lockhart River Learning Circles facilitated by the Puuya Foundation where the education of the community's children, both in the local school and in boarding was often discussed. Parents, guardians and community members exhibited great pride in the achievements of a small number of students who appeared on track to complete Year 12, but this success was largely the exception.

Discussions around the situation experienced by students in boarding were often characterized by great frustration around the suspension or exclusion of students by boarding providers, without any real attempt to communicate respectfully in a manner which reflected an understanding of the practicalities and realities of living in a very remote community, especially regarding the issues with suspension or exclusion travel. From the interviews there emerged a strongly held view that a number of boarding providers had made little in the way of a real attempt to communicate with community or to involve parents and guardians in the education of their children.

There is very little in the contemporary Australian literature or recent research that speaks to the concept of the quality of education service provision in boarding schools or residential facilities attended by Indigenous students, many of whom come from remote communities. There are references to issues around the perceived quality of primary and secondary education provision in remote Indigenous communities but little in the research literature that speaks of how students, parents and guardians build their perceptions and beliefs around the quality of the boarding schools or residential facilities to which students will go in order to access what they and their parents and guardians believe will be a comprehensive secondary education.

A number of the student participants in this research who went away to a boarding school or residential facility at the start of the 2016 school year had a generally positive experience of their first year of secondary education away from Lockhart River. The extent to which students were successful or enjoyed the experience tended to match my knowledge of and understanding of the school's students attended. During the course of the year, most students who were successful were at 'good' schools which tended to display the following characteristics referred to earlier by parents and guardians and community members in the interviews:

1. They made an effort to communicate effectively with the parents and guardians and the wider community and this was exemplified by the fact that they communicated on a regular basis with parents and guardians, had staff who had made visits to the community on more than one occasion and they made families feel welcome when they visited their children in boarding. In short, the boarding provider worked to build a respectful relationship with the community.
2. They were facilities with high expectations that enrolled both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and their Indigenous students came from a number of different communities. The majority of these schools were, with the exception of one school in Townsville, located away from far north Queensland, primarily in Rockhampton and Toowoomba.

These characteristics will now be dealt with in turn.

6.2.1 The Quality of Relationships and the Communication Between Boarding Providers and Remote Communities

On a number of occasions, family and community members spoke of examples where they believed that boarding schools as institutions, and in particular some teaching and residential staff, did not always treat students with sufficient care and understanding and made little attempt to engage with families, except when things went wrong. Deep feelings with regard to what were clearly perceived to have been the unfair suspension and exclusion processes of some boarding providers were often expressed at various stages of the interview process in July and December 2016.

Parents, guardians and community members who participated in this research spoke often about the lack of what they saw as respectful and regular communication between boarding providers and families at home in community. They were able to articulate clear examples of what they saw to best practice in the building of meaningful relationships which in turn underpin effective communication processes, referring to particular examples of where the staff from boarding providers, especially staff in leadership positions, had visited the community to meet with parents, guardians, students and the wider community 'on country.' In researching staff perceptions of the experience of boarding for Aboriginal students in Western Australian boarding schools, Mander, states that they (school staff) conveyed how travelling to meet parents at home or in their community was often received well and set the foundation for building a more meaningful connection with Aboriginal

parents, with one participant emphasizing, "you've got to go out to those families to say hello, so that parents actually know who is looking after their boy" (2015, p. 323).

The importance of the establishing effective communication across the geographic and cultural divide is a key theme of the research undertaken by Benveniste (2018) and Benveniste et al. (2014, 2015) which focuses on the work done to enhance the quality of the relationships and communication between a boarding facility in South Australia and the remote communities of the Anangu, Pitjitjanjara and Yankunyjatjara (APY) Lands of north west South Australia. Their work highlights the importance of staff engaged in residential programs visiting students' home communities in order to better understand the context from which students come and also create the opportunities for less formal communication with families. Their research also points to the need for resources and structures to be put in place to facilitate reciprocal visits from parents and guardians living in very remote communities to the boarding residence and the school (Benveniste, 2015, p. 8).

Most recently, research conducted by Andrew Lloyd in the Northern Territory focused on the very remote Areyonga community and the relationship that developed between the community and a school in South Australia. The successful completion of Year 12 by two Areyonga students in 2018 and four in 2019 was built around culturally appropriate communication and the development of a close relationship between staff of the school and the remote families they worked with. In articulating what lay at the heart the successful partnership which supported the students through to the end of Year 12, one participant in Lloyd's research stated that:

> I think the relationship and the trust that has been created….it has taken a long time to do that…As a father, if it was in my situation, I am entrusting someone I don't know that well from a couple of thousand kilometres away to take….to pack up my child and educate them in another state, in another place, in another system, in another world almost … we had to learn that trust and it would be ok if they were suspicious…So, I think the biggest thing…the trust and communication with the family that they know that we are here to support their children. (Lloyd, 2019, p. 54)

A number of participants in this research echoed the sentiments expressed here regarding the importance of boarding providers building relationships that engendered trust through regular and respectful communication. The comments of one parent who had seen her eldest daughter successfully progress through her secondary education expressed the confidence in sending one of her other children to the same school by stating that:

> That Principal from (boarding school attended by my children) you know, she's been to this community a few times and she's come to visit me and the kids at the house here. She knows a bit about this community and I know that my eldest daughter she can talk to that Principal and

> that Principal knows about what happens in community sometimes and why it gets hard for our kids sometimes when they're away from home. (Parent/Guardian 6)

One of the key messages delivered by agencies such as the Transition Support Service in its work with boarding providers reflects the recent research that emphasizes the need for providers to develop sustainable community engagement strategies. Central to this strategy is the provision of opportunities for residential and teaching staff to spend time in communities and gain an understanding of the community context which is so important in shaping the way students engage with their education away from community.

6.2.2 Enrolment Characteristics

This articulation by adult participants in this research of school quality as reflected in the enrolment composition of the student population was clearly identified through research into factors influencing parental choice of school in north Queensland by McCarthy (2013) where:

> The Indigenous parent data showed that there was a perceived relationship between high Indigenous enrolment and decline in school quality. Indeed, the Indigenous participants were adamant that schools with a dominant Indigenous enrolment were not mainstream: participants were clear that schools with large numbers of Indigenous students were not environments conducive to learning, and could be a source of distraction to their children (pp. 242–243)

Similar parent and guardian perspectives emerged from research which focused on the transition of students from a very remote central Australian community school to participate in a homestay program in Sydney. Hunter (2015), examined the motivations of parents and guardians in seeking a placement so far from home when secondary residential options were available in either Alice Springs or Darwin and found that previous experience of participating in boarding programs with large numbers of students from their own community or from other communities in the Northern Territory was problematic in that community conflicts within and between communities tended to follow students into boarding and eventually led to situations where students were excluded from boarding for fighting or were withdrawn by parents and guardians who had concerns for the safety of their children (p.243).

In capturing the views of parents and guardian regarding perceptions of school quality outside of the remote community context, this research mirrors the views articulated by the Indigenous adult participants in McCarthy's research and at the formal commencement of this research in January 2016, only one Lockhart River student involved in this research who was enrolled in a school where Indigenous students comprised a majority of the school population. This student was only member of this transitioning cohort involved in the research who did not make it to the end of the 2016 school year and was excluded before the end of the first semester. It is worth noting that a student not

involved in this research was a late enrolment at the same school and was also excluded before the end of the first semester.

The issue of school quality is important, because while nearly all of the recent research into the transition to boarding for Indigenous students from remote and very remote communities acknowledges the issues voiced by parents and guardians around the quality of remote education provision, especially secondary school provision, the assumption has been that boarding and education provision in regional and urban centres is not problematic when it comes to issues such as the quality of care and supervision in boarding and the quality of instruction in the classroom. Indeed, when it comes to the matter of articulating what is meant by the concept of boarding school quality for Indigenous students, Mander (2012), Rogers (2016) and O'Bryan (2016) highlight the importance of 'cultural safety' to issues around the implementation of policies, procedures and programs which address systemic racism and a lack of institutional cultural competence as the defining elements of what makes for a quality placement for an Indigenous student. In the high fee-paying and highly selective boarding schools in, Perth, Brisbane and Melbourne which are a focus of their research and where Indigenous students in general, let alone those who come from remote or very remote locations, comprise a tiny proportion of student enrolments, issues of school quality take on an entirely different meaning when contrasted with what has been the experience of a number of students and their parents and guardians from Lockhart River and many other very remote communities across Australia. In her research into the boarding experience of African-American students in boarding schools in the United States, research which focused on the social capital benefits of a boarding school education for disadvantaged students, Bass, highlighted a simple fact which, in my view, has been largely ignored by contemporary Australian researchers. That fact resides in the quality of boarding provision. Bass (2014) states under the heading 'school quality' that:

> In addition to leaving the home environment to attend boarding school, the quality of the boarding environment is a second factor influencing whether a boarding environment would be beneficial for a student. A substandard boarding environment does little to stimulate student achievement or motivate them. (p. 30).

Contemporary Australian research in this space has, with the possible exception of Benveniste's work with a South Australian boarding provider, focused almost exclusively on the ability of elite non-government schools to provide culturally safe environments. They have assumed, wrongly I would argue, that issues regarding something as simple as student safety in a physical sense are a given. The issues around school quality with respect to student safety, their health and well-being, supervision and the overall quality of the care of Indigenous students in boarding were brought into sharp focus with the hearings conducted through both the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry processes and those of the Royal Commission into

Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. As referenced in Chapter One, I was summonsed to appear before the Commission at hearings conducted in Sydney in late 2016 where the quality (or lack thereof) of the education and residential care provided to Indigenous students was highlighted as a consequence of the failure of Shalom College in Townsville to protect the most vulnerable students entrusted to its care.

In responding to questions from Counsel Assisting the Commission regarding the degree of governance or supervision that existed in the transition to boarding space for Indigenous students from remote communities I stated that:

> The quality of the transition varies enormously and the jurisdiction and the governance around the transition varies enormously, there is no standard and the fact is that the most vulnerable children are placed in environments that are generally of the poorest quality….the data around the transition of children from remote communities to boarding is weak. What we also know is that there is a churn of students who go away to board, have a significantly bad experience of boarding and who disengage. (Stewart, as cited in Lloyd, 2019, p. 15)

In articulating the anguish experienced by a parent whose child had been the victim of a serious sexual assault at the hands of other Shalom students while enrolled at Shalom, Lloyd quotes directly from the Commission transcripts, “The state that Shalom was in was not acceptable for an animal to live in. I would never have allowed (CLF) to stay there if I had seen that place.” (p.230).

This of course raises a number of questions regarding the enrolment practices of a range of boarding providers offering their services to Indigenous students, many of whom were drawn from remote Indigenous communities: How can a boarding school or residential facility enroll a child without the parent or guardian first seeing what the child’s new home would be like? It is probably true to say that it is highly unlikely that a non-indigenous child would have been placed into an environment where their physical security, let alone their general well-being and right to access a quality educational environment could be so badly compromised.

What makes the Shalom College situation prior to its closure in November 2017 even more problematic is that the College would have been in receipt of very substantial finding from the Australian Government Abstudy program without there being any guarantees whatsoever that the services provided to students were of a standard that served to protect students and offer them the best chances of succeeding at school. Representatives of the Uniting Church, which owned and operated Shalom, had previously told the Royal Commission that ‘it did not receive enough government funding to keep its students safe’ (ABC News, 20 November 2017). In fact, when the closure of Shalom was announced, the moderator of the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church stated that the decision had been made for “the best interests and welfare of our students” and that “we have a

responsibility to ensure that the school is a safe, supportive and productive learning environment" (ABC News, 20 November 2017).

In addition to the situation experienced at Shalom, issues around the ability of particular boarding providers to adequately cater to the learning and well-being needs of students, especially students from remote and very remote Indigenous communities across Australia have achieved periodic coverage with the near closure in 2017 of Kormilda College in Darwin, a school which specialized in the provision of Indigenous boarding, only avoided by a Commonwealth emergency grant of five million dollars and the takeover of the school by the Melbourne-based Haileybury College, the closure of the Woolaning Homeland School in the Northern Territory in 2017 and the closure of the Kaziew Rangath boarding facility in Cairns in May 2018. The 2019 Commonwealth commissioned report, *Boarding: investing in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* has served to further highlight the issues around school quality in boarding environments where the student enrolment is almost exclusively made up of students from remote and very remote Indigenous communities in stating that:

> Some boarding providers that specialize in boarding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have indicated that due to limited financial resources, professional expertise and human capital they are unable to offer the optimal range of assistance measure required to support their boarding students for success. Many boarding providers in this category have low retention and attendance rates, and high rates of suspension or exclusion. (p. 22)

The significance of this view cannot be understated. The report raises serious questions about the ongoing viability of boarding providers working almost exclusively with Indigenous students and their ability to provide quality education and residential care to a particularly vulnerable cohort of transitioning students. The importance of 'unpacking' the complexities at play in the discussions around boarding school quality, especially as they relate to populations made up almost exclusively of Indigenous students cannot be understated. In my experience, it is an issue which has in large part been ignored for decades and has only achieved any significance when things go badly wrong and make it into the public domain as occurred at Shalom in 2016-17.

Writing in response to the issues which would later see the arrest and conviction of the Principal of Djarragun College near Cairns on charges related to, but not confined to, defrauding the Australian and Queensland governments of close to three and a half million dollars in the years leading up to and including 2011, Noel Pearson (2011c) stated that:

> I will make two observations about the rough water Djarragun has hit, and they relate to its status as what is called in educational jargon a "sink school". Sink schools sit at the very bottom of the educational food chain: for children who are not wanted or not able to survive in schools higher up the ladder. If refused admission or expelled from higher schools, the sink

> school is your last resort. Your next destination is oblivion. If expulsion is the ultimate mechanism of behavioural standard-setting, sink schools do not have this mechanism. This is why I so admire Djarragun. It has built a castle of high expectations at the bottom of the sink. (*Weekend Australian*, 12–13 March, 2011)

Pearson's words about the nature of the enrolment characteristics of the majority of students who enroll at Indigenous only schools such as Djarragun and the now closed Shalom College cannot, in the experience of this researcher, be contested. But his rhetoric around expulsions is factually incorrect and philosophically problematic, given that the Djarragun College about which he wrote here in 2011 was active in enrolling students only to engage in a number of expulsions such as those of students impacted by the "we *let 'em go*" episode recounted in Chapter One and which that provided much of the motivation for this research. That said, there are schools of last resort, of which Shalom was one and Djarragun is one, which had become the default destination for Indigenous students, predominantly from remote and very remote communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory, who simply cannot secure an enrolment in another boarding school or residential facility. Pearson (2011c) is difficult to contradict in stating that almost without exception:

> These young people are the starkest victims of the educational failure and social dysfunction in remote communities……Sink schools find it hard to show academic progress, because they receive children who are behind their peers in more advantaged schools. Djarragun's feeder schools are among the worst schools in the country. Higher performing students bypass Djarragun and are able to attend mainstream boarding schools under programs such as the one run by the Cape York Institute. Furthermore there is always the temptation for better performing students to leave a sink school and move to more advantaged schools. (*Weekend Australian*, 12–13 March, 2011).

While the events that led to Pearson's defence of Djarragun occurred before the conduct of this research, the failure of Lockhart River students and their families to engage in any positive way with schools such as Djarragun and the manner in which students were either expelled or suspended indefinitely without any meaningful communication back to parents and guardians had left an indelible impression in the minds of many parents and guardians and were often recounted in the conversations that occurred prior to this research commencing in 2013 and again during the conduct of the research.

The educational and residential environments of schools and residential facilities such as Shalom College and Djarragun College and a number of other providers are a world away from the boarding destinations preferred by, but which have not always been accessible to students, parents and guardians from Lockhart River. The prior experiences of a number of adult participants in dealing with poorly performing boarding schools had a significant influence on how they constructed meaning

around the transition experience of the 2016 cohort of students. At the formal commencement of this research in January 2016, only one Lockhart River student was enrolled in a school where Indigenous students comprised a majority of the school population. This student was only member of this transitioning cohort involved in the research who did not make it to the end of the 2016 school year and was excluded before the end of the first semester. It is worth noting that a student not involved in this research was a late enrolment at the same school and was also excluded before the end of the first semester.

The language of Pearson's comments is both blunt and confronting but given his long-standing position in the discourses around Indigenous issues, especially the education of Indigenous students in and from remote and very remote communities, the comments made nearly a decade ago are still relevant. The pressing need for mandated standards in education and residential care which would ensure that all boarding providers, especially those who work with students exposed to the highest levels of entrenched disadvantage are both appropriately scrutinized and also resourced appropriately, has, with the 2016 hearings of the Royal Commission related to Indigenous boarding and the 2017 report of the House of Representatives Inquiry been given a degree of prominence.

Two of the final recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse are of direct relevance to boarding schools with very significant Indigenous enrolments. Recommendation 13.4 states:

> The Australian Government and state and territory governments should ensure that needs based funding arrangements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students are sufficient for schools and hostels to create child safe environments.

While Recommendation 13.5 states:

> Boarding hostels for children and young people should implement the Child Safe Standards identified by the Royal Commission. State and territory independent oversight authorities should monitor and enforce the Child Safe Standards in these institutions.

The recommendations contained in the final report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry (2017) support those of the Royal Commission in detail. In reference to Recommendation 15:

> The Committee recommends that, by 2020, the Federal Government, in consultation with the states, territories and Indigenous leaders, create a National Boarding Strategy that will:
>
> - require boarding facilities to meet the standards outlined in the Boarding Standard for Australian Standards and Residences
> - establish and require boarding facilities to meet a National Indigenous Cultural Standard: and

- recognize and appropriately account for the physical and mental; health needs of Indigenous students.

Of even greater potential significance in terms of the safety and well-being of all Indigenous students in boarding is Recommendation 16 which states that:

> The committee recommends that, by 2020, the Federal Government:
>
> - require boarding facilities that receive funding such as ABSTUDY, to meet the standards set out in a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy; and
> - Increase federal funding provided to boarding facilities through ABSTUDY, so that the standards set out in a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy can be met.

The issue of Commonwealth Abstudy funding being used as a 'lever for quality' will be examined further in Chapter 6, suffice to say that outside of state, territory or local government regulations that cover matters such as food safety and hygiene or fire safety, there are as of the end of 2019, no mandatory national standards in place which must be met before a boarding provider becomes eligible for the receipt of Commonwealth Abstudy funding. The development and implementation of mandatory standards which would provide for a degree of certainty around the delivery of a quality educational and residential experience for Indigenous boarding students must be driven by the Australian government in partnership with boarding providers, state and territory governments and key boarding organisations such as the Australian Boarding Schools Association and Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia. The payment of Abstudy funds to providers for both boarding and tuition costs and the provision of Abstudy travel to and from remote communities for students and their escorts makes the transition to boarding possible. Without the payment of Abstudy, the entire sector would cease to operate. Ensuring that providers meet a set of mandatory standards in return for the receipt of Abstudy funding would go a long way to ensuring the delivery of quality programs for some of Australia's most vulnerable students. It would also be consistent with the recommendations of a range of recent reviews and the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

6.3 The Value of Support, Both Structured and Unstructured in Navigating a Complex Space

In their submission to an Australian Government inquiry into educational outcomes for Indigenous students, representatives from the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunyjatjara Women's Council articulated the following concerns regarding the transition to secondary boarding for students from remote communities in Central Australia:

> For many young people… travelling away from family and community life to pursue school is an insurmountable obstacle. Loneliness and isolation from family and community is extreme. The transition from community life to boarding school is extremely challenging-and often

> little or no support is provided to the young person or their family back home to make the transition. Dropping out and ceasing study is the only option (Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry 2016, in Rogers, 2016, p. 243).

In seeking a placement at a boarding school or residential facility at the end of their primary school education and then maintaining that place over a period of six years, students and their parents and guardians are exposed to a complex transition space and data around boarding retention and completion to Year 12 suggests that students from Lockhart River who leave the community to access a quality and comprehensive secondary education are more likely to disengage from school than they are to finish Year 12. While publicly accessible data regarding retention is not available, there are a number of clear pointers to a high level of disengagement. At the end of 2019, only three of the nine transitioning students who participated in this research were still attending a boarding school or residential facility and in terms of Year 12 completion in 2019, there were three students who graduated from an initial cohort of eleven. However, for the Year 6/7 students and their parents and guardians who participated in this research the completion of Year 12 is a long way into the future and the focus here has been an examination of the transition experience leading up to and during the course of 2016 for a group of children experiencing the transition to boarding for the first time and the experience of their parents and guardians, some of who had previous experience of sending their children away and others whose children were the first in their care to go away for school. All participants in the research made reference to the importance of a range of supports in navigating the complex transition space.

For students, the support they received before and during their transition to boarding appeared to take a number of forms and these could be identified as structured or formal supports and unstructured or informal supports. These will now be discussed in turn.

6.3.1 Formal Supports

The most important structured or formal supports referred to by students, parents and guardians and community members related directly to the work done by staff ("The Transition Ladies") from the Transition Support Service and the role played by key residential and day school teaching staff, especially in the early stages of the secondary school journey. Students spoke of the importance of TSS staff in working with them and their teachers in their Year 6 classes, supporting school applications and travelling with them and their parents and guardians for interviews and orientation visits to boarding destinations, regularly visiting the boarding sites and providing assistance at airports as students and their escorts travelled to and from boarding schools and residential facilities. A number of students whose experiences of their first year away from community were generally positive also spoke of the importance of the structured support they received in both

the boarding and day school environments, especially when it came to the provision of transition classes and the close relationships they had built they had built with particular teachers and boarding staff.

For adult participants in this research, the work of agencies such as the Transition Support Service in providing structured support in a range of areas is of critical importance and the key role played by TSS in supporting students and families is a dominant theme of this research. The transition space is complex and the education context is certainly one where the disconnect between the diametrically opposed worlds of the remote Indigenous community and the Western schooling and bureaucracy become most pronounced. A number of adult participants spoke at length of how 'the system is too difficult for some of our people' and how it worked to marginalize and disempower remote community residents, especially a number of older community residents who had taken on the very significant responsibilities inherent in bringing up children for whom they had taken on a guardianship role. The system demands adherence to a formal school enrolment and interview process which on its own demands a voluminous body of paperwork while at the same time parents and guardians must engage with a Commonwealth government bureaucracy such as the Abstudy scheme. A successful Abstudy approval is an essential prerequisite to the enrolment of a child in a boarding school or residential facility because it allows for interview travel to occur before a child can be enrolled, supports travel to and from boarding at the beginning and each of each school term and pays a considerable portion of the boarding and tuition costs associated with attending secondary school away from community.

Yosso (2017) states that at the cultural interface there is a role for the provision of 'navigational capital' and it is clear from conversations with community and my own observations both in community and in the boarding context that Transition Support Service staff provide a means by which all Lockhart River families, especially the most vulnerable, can navigate their way through a bureaucratic process which takes no account of the realities and practicalities of life in remote Indigenous communities. Abstudy applications and school applications are complex and, at the time of this research, were almost exclusively paper based and demanding of high levels of spoken and written English language proficiency. Yet, without formal Abstudy approval, it is highly unlikely likely that the majority of children from Lockhart River or any other remote Indigenous community in Australia would gain access to a boarding facility.

The report, Barriers and Bureaucracy, Bridges and Brokers, commissioned by the Independent School Council of Australia in 2017 stated that:

> Transition Support Services assist students and their families from remote communities to take up placements at secondary boarding schools. Our interviews indicate that these services provide a point of connection, liaison and communication between remote communities and

> secondary boarding schools. A nationwide network of transition services would be invaluable; it would be sensible for the Commonwealth to fund such services in each state and territory (p. 31).

Outside of Queensland, the only other jurisdiction that provides support to remote Indigenous students in the transition to boarding is the Transition Support Unit (TSU) established in the Northern Territory in late 2015 through the implementation of the 2013 '*A share in the future Northern Territory Review of Indigenous Education.'*

The importance of structured support for students and families in the transition was further reinforced by the Queensland Productivity Commission in its 2017 report into service delivery in remote and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities which speaks of the difficulties inherent in the transition to boarding and the importance of supporting students, parents and families in the lead up to transition and the importance of providing in-school support once students have left their homes to attend boarding (2017, p. 290).

The House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry and other key reports, including the Study Away Review commissioned by the Australian Government all speak to the need for transition support to be extended to jurisdictions where the transition to boarding is supported through eligibility to Abstudy entitlements for students and families, especially those residing in remote and very remote Indigenous communities where accessing a comprehensive secondary education is either problematic or not possible because education service delivery does not extend beyond Year 6.

The need for boarding providers to provide structures support for their remote students, especially in the critical early stages of the transition was highlighted by a both parents and guardians and students with a number of students making specific reference to the importance of building relationships with particular staff who were involved in 'the transition class' which allowed students to make a gradual and differentiated transition into their new living and learning environments. Cahill (2017) speaks of the importance of boarding providers understanding that their remote and very remote students experience multiple transitions as they move from school and home during the course of their boarding school years and highlights the need for particular attention to be paid to the often complex needs of their Indigenous boarders. She states that: "Those schools which provide for boarders will require augmented transition strategies in order to support these multiple and more complex transitions" (p.15).

The level of support provided to students by boarding schools and residential providers is a critical factor in supporting student wellbeing in the critical early stage of the transition. For student participants in this research, the quality of support provided by their respective boarding providers early in 2016 varied significantly. One school for example, provided Year 7 students with the structure

of a transition class where they dealt with a smaller number of teachers and with whom they could build stronger relationships and this initiative was well regarded by both the students and their parents and guardians.

6.3.2 Informal Supports

In terms of the importance of unstructured support, students and their parents and guardians spoke of the importance of having one or two same aged peers from their home community in the same school as essential in creating confidence and a perception of safety in the period leading up to the transition and the critical settling period during the early stages of their first year away. They also made ongoing reference to the key role played by older students in the same key stages: the period leading up to the transition and the key settling in period in Year 7.

This is consistent with the more general research literature that deals with the transition from primary to secondary school which highlights the vulnerability of children in this critical period of their education journey, especially those who undertake the transition on their own and the important role played by peers as students transition from primary to secondary school is a recurring theme in the literature. Hanewald (2013), examined the research on the role of peers in the transition from primary to secondary school, especially that conducted by Weller (2007) which confirmed that "close friendships and peer relationships which survive the transition have a profound effect on how children settle into secondary school and how likely they are to form the most solid and stable friendships later in life" (p.64).

This is a point of critical significance. The value attached to peer relationships, both same age peers and older students, for Indigenous children as they move into secondary school away from home was often referenced by Lockhart River students as they prepared for the move into Year 7 at the start of 2016 and again as they reflected on their experience of the transition at the end of their first semester and their first term away from home. Western Australian research conducted by Mander et al. (2015) which involved staff perceptions of the transition to boarding experience for Aboriginal students from remote and regional centres attending private boy's schools in Perth, emphasized the benefits that older Aboriginal students offered in terms of mentoring new and younger Aboriginal peers. Their research highlights the fact that "often the younger Indigenous boys use the older Indigenous boys as role models, for support as big brothers to help them find their way through the boarding environment" (p.320).

At the end of 2019, there were no student participants in this research who were attending a school or residential facility where they were the only student from Lockhart River.

6.4 Summary

In this chapter I have examined the key themes that have emerged from an analysis of the data drawn from interviews with children, parents and guardians and community members through the

conduct of this research. The transition to boarding schools and residential facilities for Lockhart River children occurs at a critical period in adolescent development and that a range of supports, both formal and informal are required to allow children to experience the best possible chance of success in their secondary education away from home. A series of interrelated factors, some of which reside in family and community and some of which reside in boarding facilities and the 'system' which supports the transition, work to produce widely differing experiences of the transition for children and their parents and guardians.

In Chapter Seven, the concluding chapter, I outline how the key themes that have emerged from this research could be used to identify areas for future research and inform critical changes to the development and implementation of policy with respect to the transition to boarding. A number of the key themes presented are consistent with those identified in the growing body of research that has taken place since 2013 and in a series of recently commissioned reviews, inquiries and reports. It will be shown that opportunities exist for significant reforms to be made in this critical area of Indigenous education.

Chapter 7: Recommendations for Further Research and Implications for Policy

7.0 Introduction

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation I outlined the motivations that lay behind the conduct of this research. A series of events involving the exclusion of a number of remote Indigenous boarding students enrolled at a Cairns secondary school coincided with a number of meetings and subsequent discussions with parents and guardians from Lockhart River community regarding the education of students who had left the community to participate in a secondary boarding education. Personal reflections on the exclusion events and the stories and experiences recounted by parents, guardians and Lockhart River community members led me to engage formally in research which would 'give voice' to community members, especially students and their parents and guardians regarding their experience of the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities in pursuit of the quality, comprehensive secondary education not available in community. With the support of community members, the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council and the Puuya Foundation and utilizing a phenomenological approach, I worked in community to document the experiences of student and adult participants before, during and after the first year of the transition to boarding. The articulation of the experiences of Lockhart River children in transitioning to secondary school away from home and the experiences of the parents, guardians and community members who support them has revealed significant imbalances in the exercise of power in the transition space. In writing of their support for the conduct of this research, the Puuya Foundation wrote that:

> Far too many students do not finish their secondary education and are sent home for reasons that are not always made clear to our families. There is a real desire in Lockhart River to see a big improvement in education and work outcomes for young people of the community and we see that this research will have an important role to play in our understanding of how it is that the secondary school experience can work best for students now and in the future. (Puuya Foundation correspondence, August 2014)

The critical importance of Lockhart River's children being able to transition successfully and thus access secondary education provided an ongoing motivation for this research, given that:

> Graduation from secondary school is an important predictor of future employment and income, health and wellbeing, and life expectancy for Aboriginal young people. (Zubrick et al., 2006, as cited in Mander et al., 2013, p. 313)

The space, or 'field' in Bourdieuian terms, which is the transition to boarding for Indigenous students from remote and very remote communities is both complex and contested. It is complex because it occurs across a range of closely related elements: culture and language, geography and distance, the transition from a life oriented around family and community to a non-Indigenous institutional orientation and a history of highly problematic government policies in relation to

Indigenous people, all set in the context of a critical period in early adolescence. “Students who have negative transition experiences are more likely to experience depression, lower learning attainment, poorer peer connections, and lower self-esteem and, higher levels of anti-social behavior” (Cahill et al., 2017, p. 3). Positive transition experiences are the key to successful and ongoing engagement in secondary education for all children, but given the very limited opportunities available to remote Indigenous students, the consequences of a poor transition experience are far more likely to result in disengagement from education.

It is a contested space because while there is universal agreement that higher levels of educational attainment and participation are good for all people, there is not universal agreement that going away to a boarding school or residential facility is necessarily the best way for all Indigenous students from remote and very remote communities to access a quality secondary education. A recurring theme of much of the recent research in this space points to a lack of rigor in the evaluation of a range of programs, policies and initiatives to support the education of children away from their home communities.

While adults who participated in this research are clearly of the view that the transition to boarding is a much better option for Lockhart River children than remaining in community for secondary school, very low completion rates as measured by Year 12 completion with an externally recognized form of certification indicate that a great deal of work needs to be done to deliver the outcomes that are intended to come from leaving the community for secondary schooling. The fact that three Lockhart River students, all girls, completed Year 12 at the end of 2019 and only three of the eight students involved in this research were still attending boarding at the end of 2019 would indicate that the rich qualitative data which has emerged from this and other recent research must be matched by a similar emphasis on a rigorous investigation as to what the numbers are; how many students have gone away to boarding and whether they have, by comparison with their peers who remained in community, achieved rates of education or employment participation and attainment that justify the socio-emotional, cultural and financial costs associated with the transition?

7.1 Further Research: The Need for Quantitative Data Analysis

This research is qualitative and almost all of the current body of recent research into boarding for Indigenous students is qualitative in nature. The significant research interest which has followed Mander’s 2012 thesis has articulated a range of perspectives on the transition: students, parents and guardians, community stakeholders, teaching and residential staff on the experience of boarding away from home, but there has been no similar focus on quantitative data which would indicate how many children enter the transition space and progress through the secondary school system. Indeed, complete data sets around the commencement, retention and completion rates of remote and very

remote Indigenous students who transition to a boarding school or residential facility are either non-existent or not available in the public domain for any educational jurisdiction in Australia.

Research conducted by Nakata et al. (2017) into the retention rates of Indigenous tertiary students points to the need for learning support practices to be developed "so that *each* student has the optimal support conditions to stay in study and academically progress towards completion over the course of a degree." Importantly, in terms of building an appropriate discourse around issues of retention and completion Nakata writes that" it is extremely important that the focus on the educational meaning of ' the gap' between Indigenous and domestic students is directed towards the student support effort and not directed towards the characterization or typification of Indigenous students" (p.4). Nakata's research speaks of the importance of local data collection for tracking student progress and evaluating outcomes against student support strategies and should serve as an important template for the development of similar approaches to issues of remote Indigenous secondary student retention and completion in their boarding education.

The lack of readily available quantitative data in this sector opens up a range of issues and questions for future research. The most pressing of these relates to the outcomes currently being delivered from the transition of students from remote Indigenous communities to boarding schools and residential facilities. As was demonstrated in the literature review, a range of secondary scholarship providers, who are the recipients of significant funding from the Australian Government and the philanthropic sector, will periodically promote stories of individual success, but in a broader sense it is clear that the quantitative data is surprisingly weak. It is a point articulated by Guenther et al. (2017) who state simply that:

> We know almost nothing beyond the positive media stories about the destinations of boarding students who come from remote communities. We do not know how long they stay at school for, how many schools they attend over their secondary years. In short, there is very little empirical evidence to support any policy on boarding-which perhaps explains why there is so little policy. (p. 5).

Community consultations undertaken by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation in the Northern Territory through their Remote Education Systems project identified a number of key questions related to the transition of Indigenous children from remote communities which are of particular relevance in identifying future directions in research. The most significant of these were:

- What are the actual retention rates for remote students going to boarding schools?
- Who collects or holds the data that will provide this information?

- Where are the evaluations of the many targeted boarding programs that currently exist in Australia?
- What is the level of need or demand for boarding from remote communities?
- What happens to students on completion of their boarding experience? Do they return to communities or move elsewhere?
- On what basis do boarding schools select students?

Concerns regarding the lack of data regarding the transition to boarding were further articulated by Rogers and Biddle (2016) in their submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry when they wrote that:

> The first thing to note up front is that we do not have the data to definitely answer the question of whether attending a boarding school has positive or negative effects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Simply put, those who attend boarding schools are vastly different to those who do not, and it is therefore near impossible with the data we have to tell whether any observed differences in outcomes are driven by the boarding school experience itself or, differences which would have occurred anyhow. In slightly more technical terms, we lack a counterfactual. (p. 1)

The lack of research data to support the positive benefits or outcomes that derive from boarding, outside of those stories that celebrate individual success, was a feature of a number of other submissions to the House of Representatives Inquiry. Given the role of the Commonwealth Government in supporting and enabling the transition through Abstudy and through payments under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy to individual scholarship and boarding providers it is not surprising that in their final recommendations the committee stated that: "the Federal Government should, through its regional offices coordinate services for boarding students from remote and very remote communities including collecting and tracking student data regarding attendance, retention, educational performance, and outcomes (employment, tertiary studies etc.)" (2017, p. 123).

As of the end of 2019, it remained unclear as to whether this recommendation and those relating to the implementation of mandatory boarding standards being tied to Commonwealth funding will be implemented.

What is clear is the lack of publicly available data regarding the outcomes from the transition to boarding must be responded to in order that rational judgements can be made about ongoing allocation of very significant levels of Australian Government funding through Abstudy and a range of other programs. The appropriately de-identified longitudinal tracking of the data pertaining to students from remote communities would for example, allow for the identification of interventions which would address what are anecdotally believed to be very disappointing outcomes in terms of

engagement, retention and attainment for Indigenous students from remote a communities. In short, the data would help us to answer the questions raised by the Centre for Cooperative Research listed above and a number of other key questions such as:

- What are the departure/disengagement points for students who leave boarding schools and residential facilities and return to community?
- Do students who disengage from boarding then engage in secondary programs (where available) when they return home?
- Are there particular boarding schools, residential providers, scholarship providers whose data can assist in identifying strategies that best support retention?
- What is the efficacy of some of the 'newer' models of boarding provision such as those implemented by the Australian Football League (AFL) and the National Rugby league (NRL)?

Given the considerable growth in interest in the transition space as evidenced by the amount of recent research and the involvement of the Commonwealth in commissioning the House of representatives Standing Committee inquiry and reviews such as the Study Away Review into Abstudy, the call for quantitative research is very timely.

The barriers to the collection of data are of course quite significant given the differences in the monitoring of transition between the various educational jurisdictions where the transition to boarding is an important feature of the remote education landscape and the fact that boarding providers who currently experience difficulties in retaining their students drawn from remote communities and who have historically struggled to retain students would most likely be reluctant to share their data if it were to present an unflattering view of their performance. The fact that almost without exception, Indigenous students transitioning to boarding, even those on scholarships, do so through their eligibility for Abstudy it is essential that the tracking of student transition data is, first and foremost, a responsibility of the Australian Government as stated the final recommendations contained in the House of representatives Standing Committee report. It is my experience that the Australian Government Department of Social Services and the Department of Human Services which are responsible for the development and implementation of Abstudy policy are reluctant to publicize Abstudy data based on concerns around privacy. These concerns could and should be addressed through the development of appropriate partnerships and protocols between the relevant government agencies, boarding providers and their sector representatives such as the various state and territory Independent and Catholic schools councils and commissions, sector-wide representative organizations such as the Australian Boarding Schools Association and Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia and the research sector.

7.2 Further Research: Transition Readiness

In addition to the need to support the recent growth in qualitative research with quantitative data related to the transition there are a number of other key issues that have emerged from this and other research that require further examination. One of the most important of these relates to the concept of 'transition readiness.'

In the Lockhart River context and in most remote Indigenous communities where the transition to boarding is the norm, children leave the community at the end of Year 6. Prior to 2015, the transition had occurred at the end of Year 7. The decision to make the transition a year earlier, at a particularly critical stage of adolescent development, was of a concern to a number of the adults involved in this research in their articulation of the view that 'they're so young now' and there is certainly scope for an examination of the data relevant to the cohorts of students who have left their communities at the end of Year 6 as opposed to those who had exited at the end of Year 7. Such an examination would also serve to identify what the ideal transition point should and would also involve an understanding of just what being 'ready' for transition actually looks like in the context of an eleven year old student preparing to leave remote Indigenous community. As the literature discussed in Chapter 2 revealed, there is much written in the general context of the transitions children make in moving into formal schooling for the first time and in moving from primary to secondary school in the non-boarding context that references the notion of transition readiness. However, there is no research into the experience of primary school-aged children from remote Indigenous communities as they prepare to undertake a complex and challenging period of transition and while a number of remote community schools, including Lockhart River State School, work with their Year 6 students and their families to prepare for secondary school such a long way from home, there is no clear evidence-based articulation what transition readiness looks like in this context. In Far North Queensland, particularly in the remote Indigenous communities of Lockhart River, Aurukun, Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama, a significant amount of work is currently being undertaken in primary schools to prepare children for the transition to boarding and the effectiveness of this work should be a focus of both qualitative and quantitative investigation now and into the future.

There is also a need to articulate what readiness looks like on the part of boarding providers in terms of the knowledge and skills of their teaching, residential and administrative staff and in terms of their ability to engage effectively with students from remote communities. It is my experience that a growing number of individual boarding schools and residential facilities have either implemented or are looking to implement programs and strategies, often under the banner of 'orientation' activities but there is no published research as yet which indicates whether these programs have had a discernable influence on improving the quality of the transition to secondary school experience and subsequent engagement and retention of their students from remote Indigenous communities. The research conducted through the partnership between James Cook University, Central Queensland University

and the Transition Support Service (The 'Resilience Project') highlighted the need for boarding providers to ensure they had culturally appropriate strategies in place to support the social and emotional well-being of all students transitioning into boarding but no formal evaluation of their success has been made to this point in time.

Traditionally, the concept of school readiness has focused on a child's age and skills. However more recent literature tends to adopt a broader definition, incorporating not only a child's readiness for the learning environment, but also the learning environment's readiness for the child (Hair et al., 2000; Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, 2008; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 2013).

The readiness of students from remote Indigenous communities and their families must be balanced by the readiness of boarding facilities to work successfully with the children in their care and make the adjustments required to give children the best possible chance of accessing their secondary education away from home. This is an area of considerable importance as it is clear that a poor experience of the transition to boarding schools and residential facilities which provides the necessary access to quality and comprehensive secondary school for remote Indigenous students can mean the end of their secondary education. With that come significant adverse impacts on their immediate sense of self-esteem and well-being and on their long term prospects with respect to employment, health and a range of other quality of life indicators.

7.3 Recommendations Regarding Policy

In Chapter 5 it was made evident that there is no coherent policy or strategy at either state, territory or Commonwealth level when it comes to the question of remote secondary education provision and what has, in the absence of any coherent policy direction or narrative, become a default to boarding. In remote Queensland for example, the small, largely Indigenous town of Coen and the Indigenous community of Pormpuraaw have no secondary education facilities at all. The same situation applies in the Torres Strait where secondary facilities are only available on Thursday Island and not on any of the sixteen other communities of the Torres Strait. Indeed, across a range of Indigenous communities scattered through remote Australia, secondary education provision is either problematic or non-existent and to access the secondary education which is a basic human right in modern Australia, children have to go away to board. If children from these places cannot find a secondary school placement or if they are excluded from secondary boarding and cannot find an alternative placement then they are denied the opportunity to access the secondary education that will in large part determine their life trajectory. This lack of any overarching policy has seen the transition space as largely unregulated and one in which Indigenous children from remote communities such as Lockhart River have, to this point in time, entered with a higher chance of disengaging from secondary education than of completing Year 12.

This research has highlighted the fact that the transition to boarding for students from remote Indigenous communities has received a considerable degree of academic interest in recent years and it is an area of education which has been the subject of a range of reports and reviews, the majority of which have highlighted the complex and often problematic nature of the transition experience for many students and for those who support them. There is a clear need to develop a clear policy framework that ensures best practice in the provision of boarding for Indigenous students from remote communities, in terms of what happens in the classroom and in the residential setting and in terms of how the financial supports in the form of Abstudy payments are administered. The development of policy should, in the first instance, focus on:

- The implementation of existing mandatory standards for boarding providers that guarantee the best possible transition experience for all Australian boarding students including Indigenous children who are unable to access a quality secondary education in their home communities and the development of additional mandatory standards that acknowledge the particular needs of remote Indigenous students.
- The designation of Abstudy in the remote context as an education specific payment and not as a welfare or income support payment which is currently administered by the Department of Human Services. Abstudy should be administered by the Commonwealth Department of Education who, in partnership with state and territory education authorities and the non-government education sector who provide the majority of boarding places for remote Indigenous students, ensure that Abstudy funding, is delivered in a manner which is consistent with its purpose which is to: "address the particular educational disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by improving educational outcomes to a level equivalent to that of the Australian population in general" (Australian Government, 2019, p. 1).

These core elements of possible future policy will now be discussed in turn.

7.3.1 The Classification of Abstudy as an Education Specific Payment for Students from Remote and Very Remote Communities

For a significant number of Lockhart River families, indeed for many families throughout Cape York, Abstudy applications and applications for boarding placements are initiated and progressed through the work of Transition Support Service staff or remote community school staff who work to navigate families through a process which can be excessively bureaucratic and time-consuming. In large part this is because Abstudy is categorized by the Australian Government Department of Social Services as an income support payment or welfare payment which brings with it a range of administrative requirements that create significant concerns for remote families and for boarding providers. It is clearly illogical to continue to classify Abstudy as welfare or income support

when there are remote Indigenous communities where secondary education is either non-existent or substantially below the standard of education offered in major regional or urban centres.

Because Abstudy is classed as income support or welfare, it is means-tested and this has particular implications for Indigenous parents and guardians who work in remote communities. Parents and guardians who work and who earn above the threshold level will be subject to a reduction in the level of Abstudy support provided for their children who must go away to boarding. In short, working parents and guardians who live in remote communities where there may be no access to free public secondary education which can be regarded as quality and comprehensive and who must send their children away to boarding schools and residential facilities can suffer significant additional costs in giving their children the opportunity to access an education which is freely available in larger regional and urban centres.

The Independent Schools Council of Australia commissioned research in 2017 to investigate the utility of Abstudy in providing an appropriate level of support to both boarding providers and the remote communities they serve. It found Abstudy to be excessively bureaucratic and the levels of funding to be well below those required to support the often complex needs of students, especially those identified as 'the most disadvantaged Indigenous secondary students from remote areas'(2017, p.1). The recommendations that emerged from the research were clear and unequivocal in stating that:

> The current location of Abstudy in the welfare space under the auspices of Centrelink is incongruous with Abstudy's educational purposes", and, consequently, "it is time to reframe the Abstudy program to return to an educational support focus rather than an individual welfare payment. (Crawford & Schwab, 2017, p. 1/2)

Abstudy for Indigenous students in remote and very remote centres should be administered as an education payment. If the Queensland or Australian governments are not going to provide a quality and comprehensive education in remote Indigenous communities then they are bound to support the transition to boarding in a way which reduces bureaucratic and administrative barriers which at times have prevented families from accessing and maintaining Abstudy eligibility. In a range of roles related to the transition, I have experienced administrative barriers such as the failure to provide a Tax File Number (TFN) once a child has turned 16 as being solely responsible for children being unable to access Abstudy supported travel. It has also prevented boarding providers from receiving the funding required to provide education and residential services to students. In effect, an administrative requirement related solely to welfare and income support provisions has the potential to block Indigenous children from remote communities from accessing what is universally regarded as a basic human right: the right to a quality education.

This research has shown that the Abstudy application process is difficult for many parents and guardians to access without structured support. Given that payments for education and boarding costs

are made directly to boarding providers and it is the providers who arrange student and escort travel to and from remote communities, it makes no sense to continue to view Abstudy as a form of welfare or income support.

7.3.2 Abstudy Payments as a Lever for Quality: The Implementation of Mandatory Standards in Boarding

Without the provision of Abstudy payments to schools for the payment of boarding and school fee tuition costs and the financial support it provides for travel to and from community at the beginning and end of each school term and for special purpose travel, it is clear that very few indigenous students from remote communities anywhere in Australia would have the chance to be educated outside of their home communities. Abstudy is the 'great enabler' of the transition to boarding for remote Indigenous students. Even the most generously funded scholarship programs such as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) and the Cape York Leadership Program (CYLP), both of which receive significant funding from the Australian Government under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) program, will only provide scholarship funds that cover the gap that exists between what the boarding provider charges and what the Abstudy program will provide.

In Chapter 5 the key recommendations regarding the mandatory standards of both the House of representatives Standing Committee Inquiry and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse were outlined and they are unequivocal in calling for the receipt of Abstudy funding to be conditional on boarding providers meeting a set of mandatory standards. There is a current set of standards that cover boarding schools and residential facilities, *Australian Standard AS 5725:2015: Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences,* but compliance is voluntary.

The National Boarding Standard is not specific to Indigenous students but given that the most serious issues regarding the churn of students through boarding facilities and associated issues with student safety and wellbeing in boarding have largely centred on facilities where Indigenous students from remote communities comprise the majority (if not all) of the student population, it is clear that there must be particular standards that relate to the quality of service provision in these facilities that are tied to the receipt of Indigenous specific funding such as Abstudy. This is a view forcefully expressed by the peak body Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia:

> It is hard to believe that in 2020 Indigenous student boarding is largely an unregulated industry and there are no specific standards to keep these young people safe from a cultural, emotional and physical perspective. This is despite the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, recommendations by the House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, and findings of the Study Away Review. (IEBA, 2020)

The issues that emerged from Djarragun College in 2011/2012, the closure of Shalom College in Townsville in 2017, the near closure of Kormilda College in Darwin in 2016, the closure of Woolaning Homelands College in the Northern Territory and the closure of the Kaziew Rangath facility in Cairns in 2018 all point to a serious lack of regulation in the monitoring of facilities that cater exclusively to Indigenous students from remote communities. The implementation of mandatory standards in boarding should be a key priority for the Commonwealth and for state and territory governments who ultimately have responsibility for the delivery of education services and compliance of these standards should be tied to the receipt of Abstudy funding by boarding schools and residential facilities.

The implementation and monitoring of mandatory students would also support a thorough evaluation of what it actually costs a provider to deliver a quality residential and educational experience to students from remote Indigenous communities. A 2016 review commissioned by the Northern Territory Government Department of Education estimated that the funding shortfall between the income received by boarding providers from all sources including Abstudy and the actual costs per capita of delivering a boarding school education to students from remote Indigenous communities was $10,437 per student (KPMG, 2016). A 2018 report commissioned by the Australian government also found evidence of a significant shortfall in the level of funding required to deliver an appropriate level of service to Indigenous students.

The report stated clearly that:

> The investment required to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in boarding increases with the level of disadvantage of the students and the boarding provider. Reviewing the structure of payments supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students to include an expanded or reviewed loading for disadvantage or need would assist in addressing the financial pressures faced by many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding providers. It would also enable providers to expand or improve existing support services for boarders from disadvantaged and/or trauma backgrounds. (Grant Thornton Australia, 2018, p. 17)

In short, it is clear that policy in the remote Indigenous boarding space must be predicated on the development and monitoring of mandatory standards tied to a level of funding that matches the actual cost of delivering a quality service. In the current policy vacuum, the funding is inadequate and it is delivered in an environment which is largely unregulated. In that unregulated and under resourced environment, the students requiring the greatest level of resourcing are at greatest risk of being placed

in facilities least able to meet their learning and well-being needs. Again, the likelihood is that the disadvantage which is meant to be addressed through education will be further entrenched.

7.4 Summary

Students from remote Indigenous communities such as Lockhart River attend boarding schools and residential facilities in order to access the quality comprehensive secondary education that is not available at home. In spite of the supports, both formal and informal, that are available to them and to their families, they are more likely to disengage from school prematurely than they are to finish Year 12. While there are other measures of success in addition to Year 12 completion such as exiting to further training or direct employment, few of those who disengage from boarding, especially those who disengage before the end of Year 10, take up work or further training. For girls, disengagement is often a precursor to early pregnancy and motherhood while for boys it is a precursor to early engagement with the justice system and a default to a reliance on welfare, sometimes punctuated by periods of intermittent employment. The situation for girls has particularly dire consequences for future generations with Malin (2009) stating that:

> Better schooled-mothers have more self-confidence in seeking out appropriate health-care and complying with the prescribed medical treatment. It is proposed that for each additional year of maternal schooling child mortality is reduced 7-9 per cent. Studies have found that in countries with equivalent gross national products, adult mortality is inversely related to levels of adult literacy. It is suggested that a 10 per cent increase in literacy rates could lead to a 10 per cent decrease in child mortality. (p. 13)

Boarding for Indigenous students from remote communities is about creating opportunities for accessing a quality secondary education that does not exist at home. It is an opportunity taken up each year by students from Indigenous communities across remote Australia. But even without the hard quantitative data, it is clear that if we are to measure the success of the transition by the number of children who successfully complete Year 12 or who may leave early but still transition into employment or further training, boarding is not succeeding for enough students.

The remote Indigenous communities of Cape York in Far North Queensland experience positive educational outcomes well below those of the rest of Australia. By any measure, Lockhart community is one of the most remote communities in Australia, and it features highly on a considerable number of indicators socio-economic disadvantage. At the same time it is a community that wants to achieve the best for its children. Many adults in the community are committed to ensuring that the children of Lockhart River have the best possible experience of education, both inside and outside of the community. In a series of conversations held before, during and after the conduct of this research, a number of adults in the community spoke of their desire to see children who go away to boarding return at some stage to take up roles such as teachers and nurses and other

positions that have been occupied by non-Indigenous staff for as long as anyone can remember. They know that to achieve this, the community's children will not only have to complete Year 12 with more than a statement of attainment, they will also have to do additional studies at university.

In a move that other remote Indigenous communities in Cape York have expressed a desire to replicate, the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council offers boarding students in Year 10 and above paid wok experience when they return to community for school holidays. For a number of students in boarding, the work experience provides skills that make them work ready and also provides much needed income to cover incidental expenses when they are back in boarding school. The Council website and Facebook page often feature boarding students engaged in meaningful community development activities. The paid work experience is only accessible to students who have demonstrated that they have maintained a place in boarding school. The paid work experience scheme supports in its own, if unintentional way, the essential premise of theories that articulate the importance of education in building the capital that allows access to a range of economic benefits. In doing so, it sends a clear message to the wider community: education is a means of accessing an income beyond that prescribed by welfare.

What the existing literature and conducted research reveal, however, is that the transition to boarding for Indigenous students from remote communities across Queensland and from other remote regions and Lockhart River specifically can be highly problematic in terms of its ability to deliver on positive and sustainable long term educational outcomes that are of personal and collective benefit. Accurate quantitative data around secondary retention in boarding for remote Indigenous students is still not available in 2020, despite the highly problematic issue of disengagement now widely documented in the research literature. In their executive summary, the authors of the final report of the 2016/2017 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs inquiry stated the following:

The overwhelming evidence heard by the committee was that boarding, particularly mainstream boarding, is not meeting the needs of Indigenous students. A significant proportion of students who attend schools away from home drop out, and, return to community shortly after commencing. This can have devastating impacts on the students' motivation to study and their self-esteem. It can also discourage others in the community and places financial and administrative strain on both the boarding facilities and schools within the local community. This 'revolving door' within Indigenous boarding must be addressed if educational attainment is to be improved (p. xix).

Of the eight students transitioning to boarding in 2016 who participated in this research, only three entered Year 11 at the start of the 2020 school year. Of the ten students who did not participate in the research, only one started the 2020 in Year 11. Further to this, it is unusual for secondary school aged students who return to community to engage in the limited secondary program offered at the

school. In short, their formal education ceases unless an alternative boarding placement can be found. I have observed example of students taking advantage of a ‘second’ chance at boarding, but again, this is the exception.

There are a small number of students from Lockhart River who have successfully navigated their way through the initial anxieties, the issues of adjustment and the ongoing complexities and tensions that come with accessing secondary education away from community. Adult participants in this research, who I believe reflect the broader view of the community, take great pride in their achievements. The challenge presented by this research is to have the positive experience of that small number of students become the norm for students who leave the community in order to access a quality, comprehensive secondary education. When, and only when that happens, will the Lockhart River community see its children take up their rightful position in the community as teachers, nurses, electricians, builders and community CEO’s. Only then will the community of Lockhart River witness an alignment between expectation and reality when it comes to the transition to boarding.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In writing of the ability of a quality education to prepare Indigenous children for employment and the benefits to health, choice and opportunity that accrue from this, while at the same time preserving and reinforcing their rich cultural heritage, respected Indigenous leader Mick Dodson articulated a view that should underpin any educational program that aims to enrich the lives of young people from remote Indigenous communities. Dodson stated that:

> Social justice must always be considered from a perspective which is grounded in the daily lives of Indigenous Australians. Social justice is what you face when you get up in the morning. It is awakening in a house with an adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and appreciation of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of employment and good health; a life of choices and opportunities, free from discrimination (Dodson, 1993 quoted in Burney, 1996 Frank Archibald Memorial Address).

While there is a strongly emergent stream of thought in much current research that has chosen to view the transition to boarding in modern Australia boarding as intrinsically steeped in colonial and racist practices and thus laud the merits of 'education on country,' the reality is that secondary education in remote communities is, in the words of Indigenous leader Noel Pearson, 'a miserable failure.' It is a failure that, with few exceptions, condemns many children from remote Indigenous communities to a life on welfare and a shortened life expectancy. There are only so many 'jobs on country' working as rangers and tour guides and the view that children from remote communities should not be allowed the opportunity to work as doctors, nurses, teachers and community administrators should be challenged as both patronizing and paternalistic.

In the same way, any reference to the current system of boarding in Australia as reminiscent of a new 'Stolen Generation' should be rejected as both ignorant and paternalistic. In the course of my work and in the conduct of this research in the period 2013 through to 2020, I have had the opportunity to attend a number of conferences, forums and symposiums where the transition of Indigenous children to boarding schools or residential facilities has been the focus of the gathering or a key part of it. On a number occasions, either during the conduct of question and answer sessions at the end of presentations or during informal conversations, questions have been asked as to whether the current situation which sees children leaving their home communities, often for periods of up to six years, represents a return to the period of the Stolen Generations.

At one gathering I attended in 2018, the principal of an Aboriginal boarding school responded to a comment made in an open forum, likening the current situation in Indigenous boarding to the Stolen Generations. Her slow, deliberate response to the comment brought the forum to absolute

silence. She said; “Don’t you ever, ever liken the work that I do to that of the Stolen Generation. I and my family are of that generation. I am about creating opportunity and choice. The Stolen Generation took that away.”

In a story about the work being undertaken in the education of students from remote central Australian communities, journalist Michael Owen articulated many of the difficulties that confronted students entering the structure of boarding school environment that operated in total contrast to the rhythms of community life. Having outlined the complexity of the transition he stated that, “Then there is the ideological debate about predominantly white modern-day missionaries collecting Aboriginal children from Indigenous communities, essentially to raise them in a religious educational setting” (Australian Newspaper, November 16, 2018).

Patrick and Moodie (2016) state that “Indigenous education is a highly contested space in Australia and locally” and that “in recent years it has become one of the most pressing equity concerns” (p. 165). I would argue that no part of Indigenous education is more contested, or indeed more complex than the space in which the transition from remote Indigenous communities to boarding schools and residential facilities occurs.

As has been mentioned previously, this research has taken place during a period in which the transition has come under the research spotlight and has attracted the interest of governments at state, territory and Commonwealth levels with the commissioning of a variety of reports, reviews and inquiries and a Royal Commission. I have contributed to the research agenda, contributed to and been a part of a range of inquiries and the Royal Commission. During the course of this research I have witnessed the jailing of a boarding school principal, the closure of two facilities catering solely to Indigenous boarders and had a professional connection with the opening of new and innovative models of residential care.

On reflection, it has been a challenge for me to disentangle my realities as practitioner and researcher and to respect the finest traditions of phenomenological research and ‘bracket my assumptions’ in order that the voices of participants in this research appear in a way that accurately relates to their experience of the transition to boarding. That said, my reflections on the conduct of this research, my engagement with the transition agenda and on my professional experiences working in positions directly connected to the transition lead me to believe that boarding schools and residential facilities have a key role to play in addressing the entrenched disadvantage that characterizes so much of remote Indigenous Australia.

The challenge lies in ensuring that the transition space works in a way that ensures the best possible outcomes for students and does not drive disadvantage deeper. The paternalistic and essentially racist practices documented by researchers such as O’Bryan (2016) and Mander (2013), the shameful conduct of schools such as Shalom College prior to its closure in 2017 and the almost total

lack of accountability of boarding providers in their suspension and exclusion practices point clearly to the fact that Indigenous boarding needs to ensure that its practices meet the highest standards of external scrutiny. In the same way, the view that secondary education in remote communities can meet the education and well-being needs of young Indigenous men and women in the Twenty First century must be subject to the same degree of external scrutiny.

8.0 A COVID 19 Postscript

The COVID 19 pandemic has served to highlight the vulnerability of the Indigenous boarding sector. Indeed, for many students of secondary school age in and from remote Indigenous communities, 2020 was a year of unprecedented disruption with boarding schools and residential facilities which cater for large numbers of remote Indigenous students largely closed from mid-March 2020 through to the end of Term 2. While efforts were made to provide for the continuity of learning for students who have not been allowed to return to their secondary schools as a consequence of COVID 19, it was my experience that many boarding students who returned to community, disengaged with any form of meaningful secondary education and their levels of educational disadvantage were driven deeper by factors largely outside of their control. Boarding providers struggled with the demands of engaging with students remotely because of issues such as internet access and an inability to connect with students and their families and understand the communication difficulties posed by remoteness. Indeed, COVID served to magnify the extent of the digital divide between urban and regional Australia and many remote Indigenous communities. Lockhart River has some of the worst internet access in Australia and it is not common for all telecommunications in and out of the community to be cut for days. Discussions around online learning as opposed to transitioning to boarding for some remote Indigenous communities are largely irrelevant while the disparity between urban and remote access remains.

It remains to be seen what the long-term impact of the pandemic will be on the students most affected, but it is clear that a significant number of students experienced a prolonged period of disengagement and many those who did return to boarding schools and residential facilities required high levels of support in order to successfully transition back into their secondary education away from home. The transition space for remote Indigenous students is complex. COVID 19 has highlighted that complexity and served to heighten the debate about the merits of students going away as opposed to remaining in community in order to access their secondary education.

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Appendix A: Problems of Indigenous Boarding Policy

Feds put students' hostel in a place without school.

Sir – The Federal government is embarking on a desperate plan to shift responsibility and some of the costs for its failed NT indigenous boarding school program to the Northern Territory government.

The $42 million 152 bed 3 hostels project announced by the Rudd government in 2008 is in tatters as the Federal government belatedly attempts to hurry through a face saving, responsibility shifting draft Heads of Agreement with the Northern Territory government.

This is a textbook example of waste and mismanagement and political interference. Now they want to tidy up the mess before the next election.

So far over $16 million has been spent on the Wadeye hostel with a net gain of one student after it was revealed that there were only 16 residents with all but one from homes within walking distance of the facility.

A senior bureaucrat from the Federal Department of Education visited Darwin recently to hand over the draft document to NT bureaucrats which was accompanied by a threat to withhold Stronger Futures funding if the NT government did not sign up within three weeks.

The document admits that security issues, student engagement and the quality of services have caused the poor enrolments and wants the NT government to put in extra police to protect the students.

The Federal government said it will work with Aboriginal Hostels Ltd and the Catholic education office on the quality of service being offered – meaning something is seriously wrong here.

The parents do not want their kids to go there for good reason. Why didn't someone ask them in the first place?

The fact is the decision was announced and set in concrete by local Labor MP Warren Snowdon before they got a feasibility study done to determine the viability of this crazy experiment.

Warren Snowdon announced that the second hostel for 72 students would be located at the isolated location of Garthalala where there was not even a school for them to go to.

Their own independent feasibility study said not to build it there. After spending $650,000 there is nothing to show for it.

With cost blowouts the number of beds was reduced to 40 and now the Federal government is saying that it will be a staged project building up to a facility for up to 20 students.

They also want the NT government to pay for the provision of school facilities, teacher housing and teaching staff.

Senator Nigel Scullion

Coalition spokesman for Indigenous Affairs

Source: Northern Territory News, April 2014

Appendix B: Letter of Support from Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council

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Appendix C: Letter of Support from Puuya Foundation Lockhart River

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Appendix D: ABC Reporting of the Issues at Djarragun College That Provided the Initial Motivation for This Research. Author's Role Highlighted

Cairns principal sentenced over defrauding Queensland and federal governments of nearly $3.5m

By Sharnie Kim

ABC New Cairns

Posted Friday 3 October 2014 at 3:40pm

The former principal of an Indigenous school in far north Queensland has been sentenced to three years in jail for defrauding the state and federal governments of nearly $3.5 million.

One-time Senior Queenslander of the Year, 67-year-old Jean Illingworth, was convicted of two counts of fraud earlier this week after entering a surprise guilty plea on first day of her trial in the District Court in Cairns.

Prosecutors dropped eight other charges against Illingworth, including $5 million worth of fraud offences, forgery, and attempting to pervert the course of justice by interfering with witnesses.

Illingworth inflated student numbers at Djarragun College at Gordonvale near Cairns between 2010 and 2011 to gain extra funding.

District Court Judge Terence Martin sentenced Illingworth today to three years in jail for defrauding the Commonwealth, and to two-and-a-half years for defrauding Queensland Government, with both sentences to be served concurrently.

However with time already served, Illingworth was eligible for immediate release, with Judge Martin placing her on a two-year good behaviour bond to recognise time already served.

Judge Martin said Illingworth's offences involved a "gross breach of trust".

"The grant system relies very much on the honesty and integrity of persons in your position," he said.

"Let there be no doubt that you abandoned your fundamental principles of honesty and integrity and committed blatant fraud.

"This offending is a major stain on an enviable career of public service.

"[However], while you have committed serious offences, I accept fundamentally you are a decent person."

Fraud was selfless act: defence

During sentencing submissions today, Illingworth's barrister Ken Fleming QC said his client should not spend more time in jail, after already serving a year pre-sentence in Townsville in relative isolation.

Mr Fleming said Illingworth's "extraordinary work history" demonstrated her dedication to educating disadvantaged Indigenous students in remote areas.

Not only did Illingworth suffer health issues including osteoporosis in the hip, he said, but her fraud was a selfless act.

"We don't excuse what happened, but it remains explicable, given her mission to educate poor Indigenous students," he said.

"Not a cent of it went anywhere except to the funding of the students who were there to be educated, which was her grand passion, and remains so."

Mr Fleming tendered more than a dozen character references in support of Illingworth, including from Indigenous leader Noel Pearson, businessman John Benson, and former senator Ursula Stephens, who said Illingworth was "motivated by the highest ideals and aspirations for the students in her care".

'Worst example of education maladministration'

However, prosecutor Michael Cowen had called for a custodial sentence to deter other principals from doing the same.

Mr Cowen argued the references should be given limited weight given they were filled with "impressionistic rhetoric" from people who were not at the school or connected to the case.

He said former education department official Richard Stewart had described Illingworth's case as "the worst example of education maladministration [he'd] seen in 23 years in education".

Mr Cowen said Illingworth's was a calculated crime, and a custodial sentence was warranted to deter other principals exploiting government funding systems.

He said Illingworth directed staff to include children who had been expelled or were not attending regularly in school census data, on one occasion claiming funding for more than700 students, a third of whom were not eligible.

Mr Cowen said when auditors were called in to investigate the school, Illingworth ordered the creation of 51 false attendance rolls, and made more bogus rolls on her personal laptop even after she had been stood down in 2011.

"In one fell swoop she confirmed her understanding that the claims she'd made were fraudulent," he said.

Mr Cowen also tendered emails Illingworth had sent to staff at school, specifying how many students they needed to meet funding targets.

"What this demonstrates is the defendant was acutely aware that children represented money," he said.

"She said we'll need at least 632 for the August census otherwise we will miss out on a huge amount of funding ... so every child is precious for more reasons than the obvious."

While Mr Cowen said Illingworth's guilty pleas had helped avoid a long and costly trial, it could not be described as timely.

He said taxpayers were still out of pocket after the state and federal governments forgave the school of its debt so it could continue running.

Mr Cowen said a number of school staff had lost their jobs over the affair, and the college continued paying Illingworth an annual salary of more than $280,000 after she was stood down until sometime this year.