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The Boarding School Education of Remote Aboriginal Students: What are the Expected Outcomes?

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Abstract

Boarding schools for remote Aboriginal students serve a multifaceted purpose that extends beyond education provision. These institutions address the critical need for accessible, quality education in regions where local schooling options are limited or non-existent. The push for young Aboriginal students from remote communities to obtain a boarding school education for better opportunities often comes at the expense of prolonged separation from family and culture, homesickness, mental health, and numerous other challenges. While recent studies indicate that these challenges impact education outcomes and completion, governments continue to invest in sending remote Aboriginal students to boarding schools. Stakeholders' aspirations for their children are often overlooked in discussions about a boarding school education. This paper explores teachers', parents', and students' views and expectations of a boarding school education for remote Aboriginal students in an Indigenous boarding school in the Northern Territory of Australia. Research methods used to collect data for this study included documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observation. Findings were analysed through the Internal Colonialism and Human Capital Theory. Analysis of stakeholders' expectations of a boarding school education indicates mixed insights. While there were common expectations amongst teachers, parents and students, there were also differences. Academic and employment agendas were shared by all stakeholders; however, the socio-political agendas were distinctive to teachers.

Keywords: *boarding school outcomes, boarding school stakeholders, Indigenous education, Human Capital Theory, Internal Colonialism Theory*

Introduction

Education in remote communities is a challenge for many families. This is more so in 'very remote' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023) Aboriginal communities. In the Northern Territory of Australia, where Aboriginal communities are in some of the most remote locations, the question about access and outcomes of education is often argued (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Mander, 2012; Suluma, 2021). In 2014, *A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (Wilson, 2014) saw the emergence of a boarding school strategy for remote Aboriginal students as one of its many recommendations. The review argued that secondary education in very remote communities was not viable for various reasons (Wilson, 2014). To

address these challenges, one recommendation was to progressively move senior primary schooling to regional centres and cities.

While such a recommendation may address the challenges related to access, opportunities, and outcomes, there is potential for detrimental impact when students move away from family and community for extended periods (Guenther et al., 2016; O'Bryan, 2021; Stewart, 2021). The push for young people from very remote communities to obtain a boarding school education for better opportunities often comes at the expense of prolonged separation from family/culture, homesickness, and mental health (Mander & Lester, 2023; Lester & Mander, 2020; Suluma, 2021). This brings to the fore the question: 'What are the expected outcomes of a boarding school education for remote Aboriginal students?'. This article reports on a study exploring teachers', parents' and students' views and expectations of boarding school education in an Indigenous boarding school in the Northern Territory. Given the lack of formal policy in this area, stakeholders' views and expectations of boarding for remote Aboriginal students were examined using the Internal Colonialism Theory and Human Capital Theory. In this study, the authors position themselves as "*allies*" (Bishop, 2015), not claiming Indigenous Australian "*roots*" themselves, but "*routes*" (Clifford, 1997; Friedman, 2002) instead that have taken them along teaching, school leadership, research, and other life pathways in and through Indigenous Australian communities.

College Background

Bonya College (a pseudonym) was founded in the 1970s. It started as a government boarding school for Aboriginal students from surrounding remote communities in the Northern Territory. In the 1990s, the Northern Territory Government privatised Bonya College. Some sectors of the community viewed the move as a deliberate policy to threaten Aboriginal self-determination and the return to the assimilation approach of the past, whereby the missionaries controlled the education of Aboriginal people. Despite the diverse views, parents of the College advocated for private ownership but on the condition that Aboriginal involvement in the governance of the College was maintained.

Bonya College enrols Aboriginal students from about 40 communities across the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia, and Queensland. The student population is 100 per cent Aboriginal. While some students are from semi-urban centres, most come from very remote communities. Student enrolment fluctuates due to the transient nature of students' movement. The College's NAPLAN results for Years 7 and 9 in reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and numeracy are below average compared to students in similar schools nationally. The College places much emphasis on employment pathways, training, and vocational programs. Given the strong emphasis on vocational education, the College has a Pathways Department whose role is to explore and organise training opportunities, industry exposure, work experience and employment opportunities for students. According to the Director of Pathways, significant funding and planning are required to enable the College to collaborate with registered training organisations like the Northern Territory Department of Education, Northern Territory Police, and Fire and Emergency Services to deliver vocational courses and programs.

Theoretical Framing

Internal Colonialism Theory and Human Capital Theory offer complementary yet critically distinct frameworks for theorising this study. Internal Colonialism Theory provides a lens through which to analyse the systemic marginalisation of Indigenous peoples within a settler-colonial state (Kharem, 2006), framing boarding schools as instruments of cultural assimilation and socio-political control. It highlights how the spatial dislocation and cultural suppression experienced by remote Aboriginal students are not incidental but intrinsic to a broader project of domination that mirrors a colonial hangover. In contrast, Human Capital Theory views education as an

investment in individual productivity and economic mobility (Gillies, 2015). In this study, Human Capital Theory examines how institutional narratives emphasise skill development and employability, often disregarding the socio-cultural disjunctures that impede equitable outcomes. These theories expose the tensions between policy discourses of opportunity and empowerment and the lived realities of cultural loss, alienation, and systemic inequality. This dual-theoretical approach enables a nuanced understanding of how boarding school education both reflects and reproduces colonial power structures while simultaneously being framed within the neoliberal logic of economic inclusion.

Boarding Schools and Indigenous People

The negative education experiences of Indigenous people globally due to colonisation, have had lingering effects on their perceptions of boarding schools in contemporary times. Indigenous people hold the view that the historic purpose of boarding schools was to assimilate Indigenous populations into the mainstream society in which they live (Smith, 2009). The structured and controlled environment of a boarding school system rendered itself an effective tool in furthering such an agenda. According to Smith (2009), "*these schools were frequently administered in cooperation with Christian missions with the expressed purpose of Christianising, particularly in Latin America, North America, the Arctic and the Pacific*" (p. 3).

Smith (2009) further argues that assimilation policies came in various degrees and forms in different parts of the world. In Canada and the United States of America, native children were forcibly taken away from their families as a strategy to tackle the Indian problem. The traditional and native way of life and doing things were viewed as undesirable and a source of the problem. Richard Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, infamously declared that the goal of boarding schools was to "*kill the Indian in him and save the man*" (Adams, 1995, p. 52). The white supremacist ideology that accompanied the colonisers reinforced the infliction of cruel practices targeted at destroying the Indigenous race, culture, and traditions.

In Asia and Russia, boarding schools were also used as an assimilation tool for Indigenous people. In some parts of Asia, such as Mongolia, boarding schools were used to educate Indigenous people in remote and isolated areas (Smith, 2009). Initially, the goal in such schools was cultural preservation; however, due to the dominance of a majority culture/language, in this case, Mandarin, the emphasis was oriented towards assimilation (Johnson, 2000). Minority languages were considered undeveloped, and students were forced to learn in the dominant Mandarin language. In Russia, boarding schools initially targeted nomadic tribes to enable them to receive systematic education, but their popularity made it compulsory for everyone. According to Smith (2009), "*[f]rom the age of 2 years, Northern Indigenous children were forced to attend boarding schools where they were prohibited from speaking their languages. By 1970, no Indigenous languages were being taught in school*" (p. 22). In both Asia and Russia, the impact of boarding schools as an assimilatory tool negatively impacted Indigenous and minority students' languages, cultures and traditions.

The Australian Context: Historical Assimilation and Indigenous Education

Historically, Australian education policy was used as a tool of assimilation, aiming to integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into the dominant settler-colonial society. Jackson-Barrett and Lee-Hammond's (2019) work, *Education for Assimilation*, outlines how education systems functioned to undermine Indigenous knowledge systems, language, and culture. Policies such as those enacted during the Stolen Generations forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and placed them in institutions or non-Indigenous homes, where education was used as a tool to assimilate them into Western norms and values. This legacy of assimilation laid the foundation for ongoing structural inequalities in education and continues to influence Indigenous students' experiences today.

Mander (2012) highlights the emotional and cultural dislocation that Indigenous students often experience in boarding schools, including homesickness, cultural loss, and the difficulty of navigating between home and school environments. While Mander and Lester (2023) acknowledge that boarding can provide access to educational opportunities, they argue that it frequently fails to support students' holistic well-being. Similarly, Macdonald et al. (2018) and Healey and Auld (2024) contend that many boarding environments lack the cultural safety and support structures necessary to genuinely meet the needs of Indigenous students. In response to these challenges, Lloyd and Duggie Pwerl (2020) advocate for culturally responsive, strength-based education models that prioritise relationships and Indigenous perspectives. O'Bryan and Fogarty (2020) further emphasise the impact of systemic barriers—such as language barriers, deficit discourse, and the urban-remote divide—that continue to obstruct meaningful educational engagement for Indigenous learners.

The Intended Outcomes of Education

From a critical perspective, education transcends the acquisition of knowledge, aiming to foster individuals' holistic development and contribute to society's advancement. According to Dewey (1938), education is not merely a preparation for life but is life itself—a continuous process of growth and reconstruction of experience. It cultivates critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility, equipping learners to navigate and influence an ever-changing world (Noddings, 2005). Freire (1970) emphasises the emancipatory potential of education, arguing that it should empower individuals to challenge oppressive systems and become active agents of change. Furthermore, education is crucial in promoting equity and inclusion, providing a pathway for social mobility and reducing disparities (UNESCO, 2015). In modern contexts, education also supports the development of global competencies, preparing students to engage in interconnected and culturally diverse societies (OECD, 2018). Thus, education is about academic attainment and shaping individuals who can think critically, act ethically, and participate fully in local and global communities.

The intended outcomes of education have become a complex and contentious concept in recent times. It often reflects the socio-economic and political agendas of the jurisdiction or the nation. In Australia, according to the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019), the education goals for Australians are "*[i]mproving educational outcomes for all young Australians [which] is central to the nation's social and economic prosperity and will position young people to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives*" (p. 4). The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration* also emphasises the role of education in equipping young Australians with the necessary knowledge, skills, and values for the nation's economic prosperity and social cohesion. It articulates that schooling is a shared responsibility of students, parents, families, businesses, and education providers (Education Council, 2019).

The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration*, acknowledges Indigenous culture, highlighting it as a critical component of what education should achieve:

> *Through education, we are committed to ensuring that all students learn about the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and seeing all young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples thrive in their education and all facets of life (Education Council, 2019, p. 3).*

While this acknowledgement is articulated in the document, the extent to which its aims are achieved is variable (see the *Closing the Gap Report* by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2022). The overemphasis on the ideologies and agendas of those in power can lead to a narrow outcome of education that fails to consider social and cultural differences. Education from this perspective can be a challenge, particularly for people who do not share the Eurocentric culture and values of education offered to them (Morgan, 2019).

In contrast to the broad goals of education in the *Alice Springs Declaration*, Wilson's (2014) *A Share in the* Future focuses specifically on democratic access via English literacy development as the goal for the schooling of Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory:

> *To focus on the skills and knowledge that underpin success in the Western education system. The review has taken as a non-negotiable that there must be an explicit focus on improving unacceptably low outcomes for Indigenous children and that this will not be achieved unless there is rigorous and relentless attention to learning English and gaining the skills that support participation in a modern democracy and economy (p. 35).*

In such a narrow and mono-cultural ideology of education, students are viewed as a homogeneous group. Mastering the English language, a foreign language in many Indigenous communities, is a perceived imperative for success. Success here is portrayed as the ability to actively participate in democratic and economic activities, a Eurocentric ideology driven by capitalism (Bass, 2014; Guenther & Fogarty, 2020). The Western notion of success becomes the benchmark for success, while other achievements on the periphery are considered less valuable in educational outcomes. From this perspective, the dominant culture has a significant influence on the agendas of education, thus creating identity tension and marginalisation of Aboriginal students (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020).

Methodology

Three research methods were used to collect data for this study: documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observation. Considering the sensitivity of researching Indigenous issues and people, a culturally appropriate method was employed. The adoption of the 'yarn' to complement the semi-structured interview allowed Indigenous participants to engage and share their stories. According to Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010), "*Yarning in a semi-structured interview is an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and the participant journey together, visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study*" (p. 38). The process allows researchers to connect and build an accountable relationship with Indigenous participants (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). The semi-structured interview was used for non-Aboriginal participants. According to Fontana and Frey (1994), interviews can be classified into three categories: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. In this study, the topics and research questions were outlined in advance as a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews and yarns with participants were conducted in person.

Student-related and College documents, both historical and contemporary, were a rich data source for this study. The documents analysed include school memoranda and reports, government/school policy documents, students' personal and academic information, attendance information, diaries, biographies, school/hostel reports and students' health reports. Documents were obtained with the permission of the principal, teachers and students. Ethical considerations were adhered to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the documentation used. One of the key advantages of conducting documentary research is that one can easily access information that would be difficult to get in other ways (Merriam, 2009).

Field observation is also increasingly used in qualitative research to gather data. A key advantage of conducting observations is that the researcher can observe what people do or say in real-life situations rather than what they say they do (Cohen, 2000). People do not always express their true views on a questionnaire or tell a stranger what they think in an interview. As such, the field observations were used to confirm findings from other sources. Field observations were carried out in classrooms during lessons and in the playground during recess and lunch breaks. Students' behaviour in their new learning environment was closely examined. Their reaction to the new learning environment and its impact on their learning and academic progress in the classroom was observed. Teachers and other staff members' behaviour towards remote Aboriginal

students at the school was also observed. Triangulation of data gathered from the three methods was adopted to enhance the validity and credibility of findings. NVivo software was used to analyse data and generate themes for discussion.

Identifying Participant Voices

The selection process was an integral part of the fieldwork and data collection. Four criteria of Guba's model of trustworthiness in qualitative research guided the process. They were true value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability) and neutrality (confirmability) (Guba, 1981). A purposeful selection approach was adopted to ensure the study population's credibility. According to Cohen et al. (2018), such an approach engages people with in-depth knowledge of the topic under study.

Ethical standards outlined by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, and Universities Australia (2023) were closely adhered to during the invitation and recruitment process. Fairness, respect, autonomy, and cultural sensitivity were upheld at every stage of the process.

Participants' experience and good knowledge of the topic were criteria used to select participants. The nine boarding students and five Aboriginal parents were from very remote communities located across the Northern Territory. The students were enrolled at the College, and their experiences of boarding school ranged from three months to six years. Some parents involved in the study were not new to boarding school. Their experiences with boarding school were extensive. However, as English is a second language for many parents, basic English was used during the yarn. In some cases, family members competent in English were engaged as translators during the yarning circle. For similar reasons, the seven educators (including the Deputy Principal, teachers, and boarding staff) were selected because of their experience in Indigenous education and boarding schools. Collectively, the depth of knowledge among the participant groups enhanced the dependability and trustworthiness of their input. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the Bonya College and the University of New England after following due process. Details of participants are available in the Findings section below.

Findings

College Staff Voices

Table 1 details information about the seven educators at the College who participated in this study.

Table 1: Summary of the Seven Educator Participants

Pseudonym	Position	Background
Lucas	Deputy Principal	Lucas is a non-Indigenous man who joined the College as a music teacher before becoming the Director of Teaching and Learning.
Olivia	Director of Pathways	Olivia is a non-Indigenous woman whose role involved the overall management of the Pathways Department. This includes working in partnership with registered training organisations to organise courses, training programs, industry experience and apprenticeship for students.
Henry	Director of Boarding	Henry is a Polynesian man. He joined the College as a House Parent and had slowly worked his way up as the Director of Boarding.
Charlotte	Head of Female Boarding	Charlotte is a non-Indigenous woman in charge of the Female Boarding House, including the management of the House Parents.
Amelia	Classroom Teacher	Amelia is a non-Indigenous woman. She is an experienced senior teacher who taught literacy to students between the ages of 15 and 18.
Ava	Classroom Teacher	Ava is a non-Indigenous woman who, prior to joining the school, had taught in remote Indigenous communities for 10 years.
Ella	Classroom Teacher	Ella is a non-Indigenous woman. She is a generalist teacher who had experience teaching Indigenous students overseas.

In describing the student population at the College, the Deputy Principal indicated:

> *Most students who are present here have had very poor schooling prior and we're trying to fill in a lot of gaps, we're trying to bring them up with literacy and numeracy skills . . . because the students that we get are not exposed to a lot of those things. (Lucas, Deputy Principal).*

The above statement summarises the academic ability and history of students enrolled at the College. As the Deputy Principal alluded, most students struggle with basic literacy and numeracy, the essential foundations for learning. This was observed by the authors during classroom visits, whereby students were engaged in work well below their year level. In one of the senior classes visited, students aged between 15 and 18 struggled to write a simple narrative. As Amelia (Classroom Teacher) pointed out, "*most of our teaching time is devoted to teaching basic skills in literacy*". Students' inability to cope with prescribed learning forces teachers to modify learning content. As a result, students are given manageable work that is well below their year level. The learning challenges and historical poor academic achievement appeared to have shaped the school and teacher's expectations of remote Aboriginal students at the College. Teachers' expectations of students were identified and discussed below.

Improve Literacy and Numeracy Skills. Teachers commented on low literacy and numeracy skills hindering students' learning at the College. They argued that literacy and numeracy skills need to be improved for students to progress in their learning. Despite the approaches employed by the school to address the learning gaps, teachers admitted that it is a challenge. According to teachers interviewed, teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills is

unconventional at secondary school; however, given the students' level of literacy and numeracy, it was a necessary exercise at the College. Such a view was supported by the college's Deputy Principal. The teachers' immediate goal was to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills necessary for further learning.

Teachers also highlighted that extending learning in other subject areas is often compromised due to the large amount of time spent teaching basic literacy knowledge. As Ella (Classroom Teacher) pointed out, "*most of our teaching time in class is consumed by addressing basic literacy challenges*". Difficulties with learning were evident in classrooms visited by the authors. This was reflected in incomplete tasks and failure to engage in class. It appeared that, in many cases, students could not cope with the complexity level of set tasks. Some barriers to learning observed during classroom visits were a lack of confidence in English, learning gaps prevalent among students, different teaching approaches employed by different teachers and lack of one-on-one support in the classrooms. Many students indicated they prefer practical activities like vocational education and training programs and sports activities rather than academic learning.

Integration into Mainstream Society. This expectation was stated by teachers as one of the key objectives of the College. Teachers constantly reiterated students' ability to function independently in the Australian mainstream environment post-schooling. The College generally holds the view that enabling students to "*walk in both worlds*" is a critical part of their education and training. This is articulated in the following statements by teachers:

> *Students need to be able to function in mainstream contexts or at least in town. When they go to Centrelink, they should be able to understand the basics of what they need to do, like filling out forms and all those kinds of things. When they go to the Registry to get a certificate, they need to be able to fill out forms, etc. (Eva, Classroom Teacher).*
>
> *My expectation is that they feel somewhat comfortable with mainstream society and are able to interact and operate confidently (Amelia, Classroom Teacher).*

The intent to prepare students for mainstream integration was evident in both the academic and the boarding division of the College. The school predominantly advances Eurocentric knowledge and value systems. Similarly, the boarding division promotes systems that marginalise Aboriginal ways of doing. A dining hall dress code that obligates students to wear specific clothing during mealtime is an example of reinforcing Eurocentric ways of doing at the school. During the fieldwork, students spoke of their discomfort with some rules and practices that conflict with their ways of doing things, such as the rigid timetable and the structured routines students must adhere to.

The rigid rules and routines enforced at the College appear to be overbearing for students, who come from a strong cultural and language background. The communal attributes of living in an Aboriginal community, which students are used to, conflict with the Eurocentric values such as the individualistic culture endorsed at the College. For example, in the community, boys who have been through ceremony are regarded as men and expected to be treated as such, whereas at school, they are seen as students and are required to follow orders and abide by the school rules. The challenges can be unbearable in many cases, particularly during transition stages. According to the boarding staff and supported by students, some have used the challenging experiences as an excuse to return home. In other cases, students embrace the challenge and accept it as a new norm away from home. Whether students value the Eurocentric knowledge systems intended to prepare them for mainstream integration cannot be ascertained; however, the College argues that the education provided at the school is necessary for mainstream existence.

Educated with Life Skills. This expectation by teachers for students to be educated with life skills is closely connected to the expectation presented in the previous section. Interestingly,

life skills alluded to here are skills that are perceived to be valuable in mainstream settings. These knowledge systems and skill sets will enable students to support themselves independently in the ever-changing Australian mainstream context. While some knowledge and skills are transferable to remote community settings, others are not. The intent to educate students with life skills is embedded in the programs and activities offered at the College. Apart from the programs offered in the Pathways Department, the Clontarf Academy (a sporting program for Indigenous students) also run programs targeted at developing some of these life skills. Some examples of the programs were leadership camps, community engagement programs, drug/alcohol training, healthy living/cooking programs, automotive training, white card training, confined space training and the *Drivesafe* program, to name a few. The programs are designed to assist students' transition into mainstream society post-schooling and possibly remote communities. Teachers also highlighted that the basic life skills are necessary for day-to-day existence:

> *In order to get a license for driving a motor vehicle, they should be able to not only read instructions and fill out forms but also be able to save money to pay the cost involved (Ava, Classroom Teacher).*
>
> *They need to be able to budget money to ensure that they are not going to starve and be able to look after their family when they have one (Amelia, Classroom Teacher).*
>
> *To be able to turn up every day for work on time is important . . . this is not only hard for Indigenous people but for everyone . . . that transition is very hard (Ava, Classroom Teacher).*
>
> *When they come to this high school there are opportunities to raise them to a certain level so they have got the ability to look after themselves when they leave school and that they are relatively literate––they can deal with agencies and government people and contacts to ask for help (Ella, Classroom Teacher).*

In mainstream settings, the above basic and sometimes taken-for-granted skills are mostly acquired naturally or picked up by students within the home environment. However, At Bonya College, such skills are taught through academic and non-academic programs.

Employability. The College's strong emphasis on VET demonstrates its focus on industry skill development and employment. The expectation is to equip students with industry knowledge and skills to help them transition easily into employment post-boarding school. This was emphasised in the following statements:

> *Students do a lot of VET courses. A lot of them are going off-campus and getting experience in employment areas, and with the backup of what they're learning here, they're building their confidence (Olivia, Director of Pathways).*
>
> *I want them to be confident and strong and to continue learning and particularly seek employment (Amelia, Classroom Teacher).*
>
> *I want to see students take up pathways that will lead to a job and to be able to work . . . and feel comfortable in a working environment (Ella, Classroom Teacher).*

While further education and employment are generally the overarching purposes of secondary education, employment availability is a critical element of the process. An assessment of the courses and training offered at the College suggests that the skills and knowledge taught are relevant and usable in urban settings where automotive, heavy equipment, processing, hospitality, goods, and services industries are located. Employment opportunities in the above sectors are scarce, if any, in many remote Aboriginal communities. Whether remote Aboriginal students would remain in urban centres to take advantage of job opportunities they are skilled in is difficult to predict as there is no reliable data available to track students' movement. However,

given students' attachment to family and community it is highly likely that many will return to their remote communities after finishing school. Accordingly, skills and certifications acquired from school can be productively used in remote communities, depending on market availability.

Positively Contribute to Family and Community. The expectation for students to return and contribute positively to their communities and support their families post-schooling was discussed by teachers at the College. As the following teachers stated:

> *It's about skill development and using some of those skills . . . so the aim is eventually for them to be able to go back into community and transfer that into whatever area that they're working in (Ella, Classroom Teacher).*

> *My ultimate aim would be for them to be confident young people who can add to their community. Whether it be their community at home or whatever community they move into, and to have additional skills that they can share with people and contribute to society (Olivia, Director of Pathways).*

The tight-knit family fabric that characterises Aboriginal people often demands the younger generation to return to Country and support family members post-schooling. In discussing the large number of students who return to the community post-Year 12, one of the long-serving teachers at the College stated:

> *Every year, about 90-95% of our students go back to their community when they finish here (Olivia, Director of Pathways).*

According to Olivia's anecdotal findings, such a practice has been the trend at the school. As such, it appeared that it had been normalised as a default post-school destination for many remote Aboriginal students at the College. Given the high percentage of students likely to return to their community every year, future research may explore how students have contributed and its impact on their remote community and family.

Reach Year 12. Teachers also mentioned the expectation for students to complete Year 12. However, it was discussed as "*getting to Year 12*" or "*reaching Year 12*". It seemed that teachers deliberately avoided the term "*complete Year 12*" due to the very low number of students who completed Year 12 at the College in the past. As the Deputy Principal stated, "*we have many students who will go through and complete Year 12 to some extent*". The above statement indicated that while many students reach Year 12, the degree of completion in terms of fulfilling course requirements varies amongst students. This is reflected on the 'MySchool' website (ACARA, 2025). In 2019, despite a cohort of students reaching Year 12, only one successfully completed the course requirement and was awarded the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training. A comparable situation occurred in 2017 and 2018, when two students successfully completed Year 12 during those respective years.

Despite the academic challenges, students can proceed to the next year level at the end of each year. According to the teachers, the emphasis is on keeping students at school until Year 12. The focus is on vocational courses and employment pathways where students are exposed to hands-on training and industry experience. It appeared that the academic pathway and achieving an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank were not relevant at Bonya College. This is supported by data on Year 12 completions on the MySchool website, as highlighted previously. In many mainstream schools, effort and resources are dedicated to supporting students in achieving the best Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank. This was not the case at Bonya College. The expectation of educators is for students to remain at school through to Year 12. The following section discusses parents' details and their expectations.

Parent Voices

Table 2 gathers information about the five parents who participated in this study.

Table. 2: Summary of the Five Parent Participants

Pseudonym	Role and Profession	Background
Rosie	Stay-at-home Parent	Rosie was a stay-at-home parent whose son boarded at Bonya College. Her son had attended the school for two years.
Dan	Parent	Dan lived in his remote community and was unemployed. His son was a new student at Bonya College.
Sharnie	Parent and Assistant Teacher	Sharnie was an Assistant Teacher at the community school. Her daughter had finished boarding, and her son had been at the College for two years.
Celia	Parent and Age Care Worker	Celia had three children attending Bonya College. One of her sons was in Year 12.
Zane	Parent	Zane lived in his remote community and was unemployed. He had a daughter who attended Bonya College.

All five parents were from one very remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. Three were unemployed or stay-at-home parents, and two parents were engaged in employment in their community, as indicated in Table 2. The decision for students to enrol at Bonya College was predominantly made by parents. This was reflected in the following statements:

> *I decided for my son to attend Bonya College, and I think it is a good decision for him (Rosie, Parent).*
>
> *Me and my partner decided for her to go to boarding school (Dan, Parent).*
>
> *I decided for him to go to boarding school because there is nothing here in Community (Sharnie, Parent).*

Parents' choice of boarding school was influenced by a range of factors that vary amongst families. It was noted that despite the commonality in parents' expectations, there were also differences. The differences in expectations can be attributed to parents' education, socialisation, and environment. Below are parents' views and expectations of their children at Bonya College.

Unclear Expectations. Some parents demonstrated a lack of confidence with unclear expectations of what they want their children to achieve at the end of their secondary education. This is articulated in the following statements:

> *See how far he goes at boarding school. I want him to achieve everything (Rosie, Parent).*
>
> *Whatever he wants to achieve, I'm happy with that. I want him to stay longer at school (Dan, Parent).*

The above statements illustrate the unclear expectations parents have for their children. Traditionally, students' final year of secondary education is a culmination of years of sacrifice that comes with a spectrum of expectations. In this case, the uncertain nature of parents' expectations could be attributed to their inability to express themselves in English. It is also unclear whether it is a cultural way of thinking or parents not sharing the Eurocentric aspirations for their children.

Complete Year 12 and Engage in Employment. The expectation for their children to finish Year 12 and engage in some form of employment was expressed by the two working parents.

This is consistent with the teachers' expectations, as discussed in the previous section. However, unemployed parents discussed post-schooling pathways with little clarity. Many did not articulate the type of activities or pathways they expect their child to engage in post-Bonya College. When questioned on the pathway preference for their child post-schooling, responses of similar sentiments were received: *"[h]e can do anything available or anything that he likes to do"* (Dan, Parent).

Good Education and a Good Future. To have a good education and a good future is an expectation shared by all parents. Statements like, *"I want her to have a good education and a good outcome for her future"* (Zane, Parent) were highlighted by parents. A good education and future can have varying meanings. From a Eurocentric standpoint, a good education would be equated to the successful completion of Year 12 or a university education, and a bright future would mean engaging in a form of employment and being financially independent—the individualistic Western liberal norms of success (Hughes et al., 2025). From a remote Aboriginal standpoint, the idea of a good education and a good future may have a different connotation. It may or may not necessarily mean the successful completion of Year 12 and employment (see Milne and Wotherspoon, 2023; Shay et al., 2021). Regardless of how it is interpreted, it is likely that the interpretation will reflect Aboriginal worldviews and belief systems, a future that values family, culture, and community. The next section discusses details about the students and their expectations of boarding school.

Student Voices

Table 3 gives more information about the nine students who participated in the study.

Table 3: Summary of the Nine Student Participants

Pseudonym	Year Level	Background
Margie	8	Margie was a new student at Bonya College. It was her first year at boarding school.
Mike	12	Mike started boarding at Bonya College in Year 8. He was in Year 12.
Saul	11	Saul was in Year 11 and had been boarding at Bonya College for two years.
Owen	9	Owen joined Bonya College from his remote community school. He had been at the boarding school for two years.
Eleanor	10	Eleanor had been at Bonya College for one year. Before joining the College, she had attended an interstate boarding school.
Stella	10	Stella was a new student at Bonya College. She had attended a boarding school interstate before moving closer to home.
Liam	9	Liam was a Year 9 student who joined Bonya College from his remote community school.
Jarvis	11	Jarvis was a Year 11 student who joined after completing his primary education in his remote community school.
Joe	11	Joe was in Year 11 and had boarded at Bonya College for four years.

Exploring students' expectations in this study allowed a better understanding of their reason for attending boarding school. Considering the sacrifices students make and leaving their families/communities to study, one would expect a range of aspirations. Every student is unique and, therefore, forms their own expectations, which are often influenced by factors such as ability level, parents' expectations, motivational level, and post-schooling destination. Below are students' views regarding their expectations of boarding school.

Complete Year 12/Finish Year 12/Reach Year 12. The phrases below were used interchangeably by students when referring to their intention of attaining Year 12. Students' stories suggest that such phrases do not necessarily mean the successful completion of the minimum academic requirements for Year 12: Successful completion of Year 12 means achieving the academic requirements of the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training.

> *I want to remain at boarding school and reach Year twelve (Owen, Student).*
>
> *I want to finish school; I've been here for five years now (Mike, Student).*
>
> *I want to complete Year twelve here. I've got one more year to go (Sam, Student).*

Despite the large number of students who reach Year 12 at the College every year, past results indicate that a very small number successfully complete the necessary academic requirements. Many students who make it to Year 12 either disengage during the year or fail to complete the course requirements successfully. Given the learning challenges students arrive with, teachers are aware that the successful completion of Year 12 is a challenging goal for many students at the College. Arguably, for students and parents, the question is whether the sacrifice to leave home and attend boarding school is the right decision. However, if students remain in their community, are educational provisions in place to support their academic needs?

Find Employment Post-school. Most of the students indicated their expectation to engage in employment on completing Year 12. These cohorts were mainly senior students on the verge of completing their education. Unlike parents, students were precise with the type of employment they intended to engage in:

> *I want to get a job and live my own life, maybe as a shopkeeper (Joe, Student).*
>
> *I'm thinking of just working next year to start at a young age. I'm looking at working in the mines (Mike, Student).*
>
> *I want to find a job when I finish school–I want to be a health worker (Margie, Student).*

The type of employment students indicated were opportunities commonly available in very remote Aboriginal communities. Employment like lawyers, surgeons and bank managers were not mentioned. It may be that the students' environment, exposure, and experiences influenced their expectations and goals in life. The emphasis on employment pathways and industry exposure at the College was also seen to influence students' expectations. For students like Mike, the industry experience was an eye-opener that motivated him to pursue a similar career post-schooling:

> *In 2017, I did a course called Resource and Infrastructure. It was just like working out in the mines. Two blokes came in to help us with the course, and it really interested me to do that type of work (Mike, Student).*

The obstacles are considerable for students expecting to pursue similar opportunities not available in their remote communities. For many, this will mean having to live away from family, to pursue their dreams.

Return to Community and Find Employment. While students want to secure employment post-schooling, ninety per cent indicated during the interview their preference of having a job in their community. According to teachers at the College, such a practice has been a common trend in the past. Most senior students return to their communities post-schooling every year and pick up available employment opportunities. Students' connection to family and Country was noted to have a great influence on their plans. This is echoed in the following statements:

> *I want work back in community because it's better than town, and families are there too (Owen, Student).*

I want to go back to community after schooling because I want to be near my family (Stella, Student).

I want to get a job in my community and stay there (Liam, Student).

The large cohort of students indicating a desire to return to the community to find work correlates with the teachers' interview findings that 90 to 95% of students return to their remote community each year. With such a high number of students returning to community, further research is required to determine the effectiveness of the education provided at Bonya College in preparing students to become valuable members of their remote communities.

Unsure and Undecided. Students who were undecided in their expectations were mostly females and junior students who were new to the College. Their stories highlighted the challenge of transitioning to a new school. Whether such a challenge impacted their views and expectations of boarding is unclear.

I don't know. Not sure what I want to do when I finish boarding school. (Stella, Student)

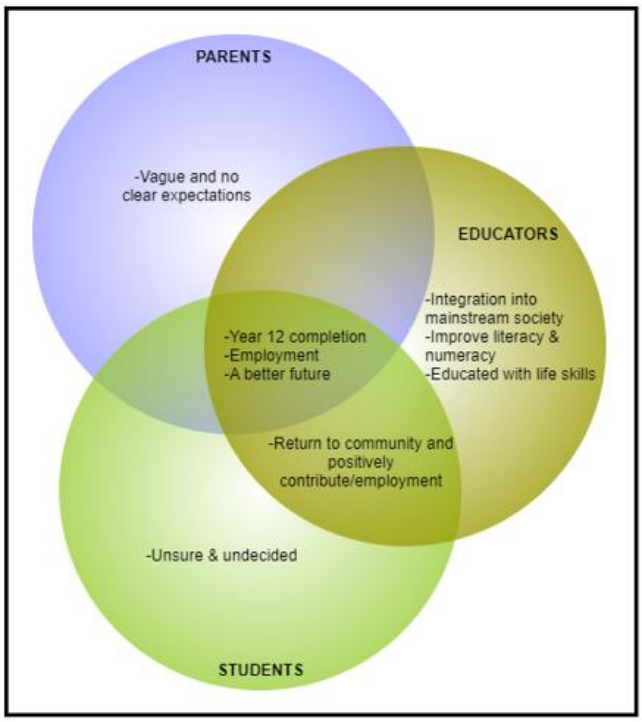
I'm not sure of what I want yet . . . I don't know. (Eleanor, Student)

In interpreting students' perspectives, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in attributing meaning to their experiences. In this case, it is unclear what shaped students' views.

Analysis of Stakeholders' Expectations

Figure 1 summarises the analysis of stakeholders' expectations of a boarding school education at the College (see Figure 1). Our analysis reveals insights that can be critically interpreted through the lenses of Internal Colonialism Theory and Human Capital Theory. While teachers, parents, and students shared common aspirations—such as completing Year 12, securing employment, and achieving a "*better future*"—these goals reflect a prevailing belief in education for economic advancement, consistent with the principles of Human Capital Theory. However, the narrow focus on employment rather than university pathways suggests a deeper structural constraint. The absence of higher education aspirations may not simply reflect individual choice but rather the cumulative effect of historically embedded inequalities. From an Internal Colonialism perspective, this limited vision of the future is symptomatic of a system that has long positioned Indigenous education within an assimilationist framework: Prioritising economic productivity over cultural continuity or self-determination. Boarding schools, as legacy institutions of internal colonialism, often reproduce injustices and constrained expectations by channelling Indigenous students into vocational or low-skilled employment sectors rather than enabling pathways to transformative educational outcomes such as university study, as evident at Bonya College.

Figure 1. ***Stakeholder's Expectations of Boarding***



The expectations of some parents and students—though at times unclear—are largely focused on academic achievement and future employment opportunities (see Figure 1). This emphasises Human Capital Theory's core assumption that education serves as a vehicle for individual economic advancement, with boarding schools perceived as institutions that offer transformative, life-changing prospects. While it is difficult to determine how much parental influence directly shaped students' educational goals, existing literature (Roth, 2017) highlights the strong intergenerational dynamics that often guide such aspirations. The alignment of views between parents and students in this study can be interpreted as both a reflection of familial influence and a shared belief in education as a tool for mobility. However, this belief operates within a broader context of internal colonialism, in which the educational system promotes assimilationist pathways that prioritise integration into the mainstream economy over Indigenous-defined aspirations. Interestingly, both teachers and students shared an expectation that students would return to their communities and make meaningful contributions. For teachers, this was informed by historical patterns, while for students, it reaffirmed the centrality of family, community, and connection to Country (Arabena, 2020; Benveniste et al., 2022). This tension illustrates the complex dual role of boarding schools as both sites of opportunity and instruments of internal colonialism: while they promise social mobility through alignment with dominant socio-economic structures, they also risk reinforcing the marginalisation of Indigenous cultural identities by sidelining community-oriented goals in favour of mainstream success.

Educators' expectations were driven by academic, employment opportunities and socio-political agendas. While academic achievement and employment outcomes align with the expectations of parents and students—and reflect Human Capital Theory's framing of education as a pathway to economic productivity—educators also expressed socio-political agendas that emphasise integration into mainstream society. This emphasis was embedded not only in the College's mission and vision statements but also in the structure and delivery of its programs, which prioritised life skills and cultural norms aligned with the dominant Australian society. Through the Internal Colonialism Theory lens, this orientation reveals the enduring legacy of assimilationist education policies, where schools function as a tool for shaping Indigenous identities to fit within the structures of the settler-colonial state. The Indigenous boarding school environment, in this

context, becomes a controlled space for instilling Eurocentric values and practice (Smith, 2009)—an echo of colonial-era educational aims described by Herbert (2012) and Welch (1996). While such an approach can be argued as preparing students for life beyond their communities, it simultaneously reinforces internal colonial dynamics by marginalising Indigenous worldviews, languages, and cultural aspirations. Educators' expectations, while future-oriented and well-intentioned, reflect a broader system that continues to privilege assimilation and neoliberal agendas.

Conclusion

Parents, students, and educators' perspectives on the education of Aboriginal students from remote communities, as presented in this study, reveal tensions when viewed through the lenses of Internal Colonialism Theory and Human Capital Theory. While male and senior students appeared to express clearer educational expectations than their female and younger peers, a finding potentially shaped by prior schooling experiences and culturally situated roles, these expectations remain closely tied to employment outcomes. Parents frequently viewed boarding education as a pathway to jobs and a "*better future*," reflecting Human Capital Theory's emphasis on education as a means of economic advancement. However, their concurrent desire for children to return to family and community after schooling indicates the enduring cultural centrality of kinship and collective identity within Aboriginal communities—values that are often sidelined in mainstream education systems. Internal Colonialism Theory offers a critical lens, revealing how boarding schools, even those that identify as Indigenous institutions, can function as sites of cultural assimilation. Despite stated aims to prepare students to contribute positively to their home communities, educators at the College placed notable emphasis on equipping students with Eurocentric knowledge and values aligned with integration into mainstream society. This focus on employment readiness—while consistent with national policy goals such as those articulated in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration—can inadvertently reproduce the internal colonial logic that positions Indigenous success in terms of conformity to dominant societal norms. The cultural disjuncture between community aspirations and institutional priorities underscores the persistent assimilationist imperatives embedded in Aboriginal education, as Morgan (2019) critically observed. Thus, while Human Capital Theory explains the focus on employability, Internal Colonialism Theory reveals how these education systems may continue to marginalise Indigenous cultural frameworks, even under the guise of opportunity and inclusion. The methodology employed in this study presents limitations, particularly the lack of engagement of a co-Aboriginal researcher, as English is a second language for Aboriginal participants, which may affect the findings gathered and their interpretation.

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