"From the Bottom to the Top": Learning Through Stories of Transitioning from an Aboriginal Boarding School to the Workplace and Life Beyond School

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Abstract

Successful transition from education to the workplace is vital for young people, particularly Indigenous students from remote communities, to support their long-term economic and emotional well-being, social inclusion, physical and mental health. This paper reports findings from a three-year study undertaken collaboratively with young people at a remote Aboriginal boarding school. Motivated by the theoretical constructs of Indigenist theory and Funds of Knowledge, this research centres the voices of Aboriginal peoples. A team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers worked *with* young Aboriginal people at the school to develop the method, to collect, and then analyse the data for this strengths-based qualitative study. Currently enrolled young people engaged in yarning with the participants, namely those who were past students from the school. This made it possible to gather stories to better understand the experiences, strengths, and motivations of Aboriginal young people from remote communities and the issues, constraints, and challenges faced when transitioning to life beyond the classroom. The findings highlight what can be improved to prepare Aboriginal people from remote communities for the workplace and for life beyond school—including their existing strengths and knowledge, aspects that occur within the parameters of the school, employer roles, skill development, and enablers of job and life success.

Keywords: *Aboriginal students, remote communities, transition to the workplace, boarding school, yarning, funds of knowledge.*

Introduction

After school, Governments and broader societal norms expect young people to engage in training, work, or further study – for their development, wellbeing, equity, and productivity in the broader society (AIHW, 2021a). Employment is essential for economic reasons, but also for social inclusion, and physical, and mental health (AIHW, 2021b). According to the Steering Committee

for the Review of Government Service Provision (2016), *"young people who do not successfully make the transition from education to work are at risk of long-term disadvantage"* (p. 7.14). Hence, a range of government policies focus on supporting this transition (OECD, 2019).

This paper reports on a three-year study that aimed to understand the strengths of Aboriginal young people who attended a remote boarding school, focusing on how they navigated life after school. To protect participants' identities, this paper (as per Oliver, 2021), uses the pseudonym Kutja for this school – a name given to us by the school's Elder at the time of the study – a word meaning 'learning language'. The research aimed to understand better the experiences of Aboriginal young people from remote and very remote communities of life beyond school to inform how remote boarding schools can better prepare young people for their unique contexts by elevating the voices and stories of people who have undertaken their educational journeys away from their home communities. The research emphasises the strengths of Aboriginal people and their home communities to highlight what schools can learn by exploring schooling practices that centre the voices of Aboriginal peoples.

This research was enabled by the long-term relationship the team has with the staff and students at Kutja School. A previous study explored the needs of the young Aboriginal people from the perspective of the various stakeholders and the students themselves (Oliver et al., 2012, 2013a, 2013b) and worked on translating the findings from such research into classroom practice (e.g., Oliver, 2020, 2021). This collaborative research was undertaken *with* rather than *on* Aboriginal people. It was co-designed in conjunction with the school Elders, staff, and the young people.

Kutja is an independent vocational school overseen by a board of mostly local Aboriginal people, whose goal is to prepare students for life beyond the classroom—both in terms of work and life skills and English language and literacy development. Kutja is located in the southeast of Western Australia, about 700 kilometres from Perth, within a working farm of approximately 1,000 acres. All students are young Aboriginal people aged 15-18 years, almost all of whom come from remote and very remote communities across the state. Enrolment can vary from 50 to 70 students. The young people may board at the school for up to four years, but some stay only temporarily. The school leadership staff and Elders worked with the research team to support this study.

Literature Review

Trajectories of Aboriginal Young People from Remote Communities

Transitioning from school to the workplace is multifarious for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in remote communities. According to statistics, 60% of the remote Aboriginal youth in Australia engage in further education, training, or work after school (Rutherford et al., 2019). Employment of Aboriginal Australians decreased overall in the last decade, falling to 59% in major cities and 35% in very remote areas in 2018-2019 (AIHW, 2021b). According to the Productivity Commission (2020), the employment rate decreased by around 10% and 16% in remote and very remote areas, respectively, between 2004-05 and 2018-19 (p. 4.71). Notably, the Mobility Survey by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) showed the rates of unemployment that were *"markedly higher for younger residents of the communities"*—69.1% among 15–24-year-olds compared to 44.3% of 24–39-year-olds and 32.7% among those aged between 40-54 (Dockery & Lovell, 2016, p. 156).

The reasons for lower rates of post-schooling engagement in employment or study are manifold; this could include "historical misalignment of education approaches with community values and aspirations" (Rutherford et al., 2019, p. 8), such as the mismatch between the neoliberal economy and the cultural values of Aboriginal people, as well as other socio-economic factors or limited opportunities in remote communities. It must be considered that *"not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are actively looking for work find paid employment"* (Productivity Commission, 2020, p. 4.66). They may be challenged due to past traumatic experiences, such as

exploitation and discrimination, or experience other barriers such as health issues, disability, caring responsibilities in their family and community, lack of jobs in their area, and the cost of looking for or training for a job (Dockery & Lovell, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2020). Not having a driving license can further restrict mobility and limit workplace options and looking for jobs away from their community means losing connection to their land, family, and culture (Dockery & Lovell, 2016). Hence, even those who move away are unlikely to enjoy improved employment outcomes because of loss of kinship and cultural connections, discrimination, low skill levels, and language challenges (Dockery & Lovell, 2016). However, those who stay in their communities often engage in essential activities, such as cultural production, which are not included in the employment data as it is not paid job but is crucial to health and wellbeing (Productivity Commission, 2020).

Research has confirmed the connection between education and employment for remote Indigenous communities (Wilson et al., 2019). Guenther et al. (2017) explored what successful education is and what it should achieve in remote Aboriginal communities. They interviewed a range of community education stakeholders across many remote communities and their data found "*the issue of employment or economic participation [was] ranked fourth behind language, land and culture, identity and being 'strong in both worlds'*" (p. 258).

A noticeable shift from Aboriginal people employed as labourers to those in professions between 2001 and 2016 indicates the positive dynamics in education to employment pathways (Productivity Commission, 2020). However, it is less clear whether this is true for remote communities. Some factors of positive changes to employment include the increasing flexibility of education. According to the CRC-REP Mobility Survey, only half of those studying or in training had to go outside their communities, and others engaged in block study or remote learning (Dockery & Lovell, 2016). However, most respondents completed their studies at the certificate level rather than undertaking higher education degrees. Even so, the authors noted a "*strong association between employment outcomes and the completion of certificates in the remote communities sample, when such certificates hold little value elsewhere*" (Dockery & Lovell, 2016, p. 167). Hence, it was concluded that the popularity of getting a certificate could be attributed to it being a practical way to successfully engage in employment in remote communities (p. 168). Although encouraging, the survey findings showed that of 1,075 people from 21 remote Aboriginal communities around Alice Springs, only 3% had post-school educational qualifications (Dockery & Lovell, 2016).

Some initiatives have encouraged remote Aboriginal youth to enter higher education; however, work needs to be done early in the educational journey to address challenges at the outset as in some remote communities, there is little understanding of the relevance of higher education. Some young people do not see themselves as prospective university students, do not aspire to careers that are challenging, or will not move away from home (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 24). Collaboration between schools, higher education institutions, businesses, and community organisations continue to emphasise the usefulness of higher education to help these young people establish aspirations for their future careers (Lea et al., 2008). Further, given that "*remote communities offer students the limited opportunity to make connections with employers, community groups, or to develop the skills needed to navigate the challenges they face in larger communities*" (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 25), programs such as UniCamps may provide young people with such information, skills, and connections.

The Australian Government (2020) aims "*to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15–24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent, compared with a 2016 baseline level of 57%*" by 2031. Based on surveys from 917 Aboriginal people in remote locations aged 15-34 (chosen as the age group for moving from education to employment), empowerment (i.e., "*identity, self-efficacy and resilience*") has a strong influence on education and employment outcomes in these communities (Wilson et al., 2019, p. 153). However, there is

little evidence indicating that schools engage in identity-affirming approaches for Indigenous students (Shay & Sarra, 2021). Thus, the disconnect between policy aspirations and what Indigenous people identify as solutions to the same problems remains an issue (Shay et al., 2022b).

While research questions whether "*remote residents are willing to go out of their way to access education and training opportunities, and the uptake of online modes of study also appears limited*" (Dockery & Lovell, 2016, p. 167), remote Aboriginal young people have rarely been invited to the discussion. Indeed, "*relatively little is known about the nature of remote labour markets and the interactivity of them with opportunities in education and training*" (Dockery & Lovell, 2016, pp. 146-147). Therefore, this paper contributes a new Indigenous-based narrative by addressing assumptions represented in the literature and policy about what remote Aboriginal residents are interested in or 'willing to do' by accessing the lived experiences and stories of Aboriginal people who have left their communities to access secondary education.

Remote Boarding Experiences

The demand for boarding services for Aboriginal students in Australia has grown (Australian Government, 2017). This is attributed to the shortage of secondary schools in remote communities (Australian Government, 2017). In 2015, over 75% of 7,500 Aboriginal students in secondary boarding schools receiving ABSTUDY[1] were from remote locations (Australian Government, 2017). Besides access to quality education, the benefits of boarding reported by such students and their educators include safety, better health outcomes, and opportunities to engage in "*meaningful career pathways*" (Macdonald et al., 2018, p. 1). It is claimed that boarding enables young people to attend school, providing more opportunities for better economic participation in the future (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). Boarding can be chosen for a variety of reasons, such as when young people "*take up a scholarship opportunity, access specific courses of study, avoid community unrest or domestic issues, referrals by courts, youth service providers, churches, councils, other schools or transition support services, or because of family or community historical connections with a particular boarding provider*" (Thornton, 2019, p. 5). A number of these factors, particularly the last, align with the situation for Kutja School students.

Based on previous research, recommendations have been made for boarding administrators and staff. It was identified that staff must be aware of the students' family obligations (e.g., attending funerals) and homesickness (Macdonald et al., 2018), be wary of generalising and to understand that every community is different (Benveniste et al., 2015). Other recommendations have been made about recreation (after classes) time and allowing students 'self-determination' about what they do (Benveniste et al., 2015). However, limited data is available from Aboriginal people from remote communities who attend boarding schools (Stewart & Lewthwaite, 2015), particularly regarding how boarding influences educational outcomes and post-school transition and employment (Benveniste et al., 2015). One notable exception is O'Bryan's (2021) work which points to issues experienced by Aboriginal students in boarding school. Therefore, the current research examines the perceptions of those who have attended boarding school, especially those from remote communities, about life after boarding school.

It is essential to explore how attending boarding school prepares Aboriginal people for independent life after school, supporting them to "*walk in two worlds*" (Benveniste et al., 2015). Research is required into how this might be achieved to reveal "*how does this manifest once students return home?*" (Benveniste et al., 2015, p. 171). Hence, the aim of the current study is to address the gap in our understanding of the life journeys of Aboriginal people who attended

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[1] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Study Assistance Scheme (ABSTUDY) aims to support students with the fees related to boarding.

remote boarding schools and their reflections on how their experiences prepared them for the workplace and life. We want to learn more about: Where do they end up? How did they get there? And: What recommendations can be made to schools and other Indigenous education stakeholders to improve their post-school journey and the outcomes? In this study, we explore these questions as we seek to understand the situation of students—past and present—from Kutja School.

Methodology

This study is framed theoretically by Indigenist theory (Rigney, 2006) and Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg 2005). This research is Indigenous-based, with a focus being Aboriginal people from remote communities and their life stories beyond school. This was an applied study prompted by an invitation from the school leadership at an Aboriginal parent-governed remote boarding school—Kutja School—and the theoretical lens that reflects Indigenous knowledge, paradigms, and ontologies. The research team are Aboriginal (Shay) and non-Aboriginal (Oliver, McCarthy, Bogachenko, and Jackson), making the study's conceptual and theoretical framing critical in cross-cultural research. Although Shay is an Aboriginal woman, she is not from the communities of the participants. Therefore, this is also a cross-cultural research context (Shay et al., 2022c).

Indigenist theory is framed by three fundamental principles that guided the research: resistance as the emancipatory imperative, political integrity, and the privileging of Indigenous voices (Rigney, 2006). The principle of political integrity was enacted by enabling student co-researchers to guide the research process. Further, local Indigenous people (two Elders who work at the school and one Indigenous teacher) were invited to be part of the research in recognising their epistemic and ontological expertise as people from the localised context. Finally, encouraging and allowing for multiple ways for Indigenous young people to express their stories, perspectives, and voices ensured that the voices of Indigenous people were privileged (Shay et al., 2022a).

In this study, Funds of Knowledge is used alongside Indigenist theory. Funds of Knowledge theory challenges deficit theorising, which blames minoritised students for perceived deficiencies (Hogg, 2011). Deficit discourses are pervasive in Indigenous education (Patrick & Moodie, 2016). Indigenous young people from remote communities are reported to have the poorest educational outcomes, and these 'gaps' continue to be the dominant narrative in educational policy (Australian Government, 2020) and Indigenous education scholarship (Guenther et al., 2019). This study refutes these deficit ideologies, allowing Indigenous peoples' capital and existing knowledge to be identified. Funds of Knowledge enable participants to identify the existing knowledge informed by their family homes, communities, peers, or other social contexts that all contribute to the knowledge and skills of the young person (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 2005).

Funds of Knowledge recognise the hybridity of cultures (González, 2006). This study encompasses the entirety of the journey of Aboriginal young people from remote communities in understanding their stories of life beyond school. Because of this, hybridity must be recognised as young people navigate different cultural and institutional contexts in accessing further study or entering the workforce.

Participants and Methods

Methods such as storying, arts-based methodologies, and digital storying through yarning (podcasts) are utilised to allow stories to emerge that bridge knowledge between home and school (González, 2006) and knowledge that is rooted in historical and contemporary experiences in family homes or home communities (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 2005). During data collection, approximately 60 young people were enrolled at Kutja School. Two 'English'

classes, deemed by the school as having the highest literacy levels and representing about 1/3 of the cohort (n ≈ 20), were involved in the study. This figure fluctuated as students returned home for funerals or left or joined the school. They worked with one of the research team members (*McCarthy* – who visited the school every week) and their teacher (*Jackson*) to develop appropriate yarning questions. When they were confident that the questions were correct, they again worked with the researcher and teacher to make the questions more natural and culturally appropriate, namely using a 'yarning' approach (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, Shay, 2021). Yarning is how Aboriginal people make and share meaning by retelling, re-visiting, and representing their languages and cultures (Steele et al., 2022). They then trialled this approach with each other and with past-enrolled students living in the community near Kutja School.

In the initial phase of engaging young people in the project, the team used an art-based approach to engage young people in storytelling. Multiple activities included the writing and recording of a song by current students about their experiences leaving their home communities, as well as artwork, led by the school's only Aboriginal Teacher.

These artworks were collated into one graphic design that was afterwards printed onto a school shirt, now serving as a quasi-school uniform but also as the cover for the podcast series. The song also serves as an introduction to one of the three podcast series.

Using a convenience sample, past students from the school—those who were still in touch with staff and students at the school—were contacted and invited to participate in storytelling to understand their trajectories after school. With consent, they engaged in yarns with different individual current young people at Kutja School. These yarns were audio recorded, edited, and collated into the three Podcast series. These served as the primary data for analysis. Both the research team and the current young people at the school analysed the data as described next.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

This study utilises Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative thematic analysis framework. Qualitative thematic analysis was used after the podcast recordings were finalised and transcribed. This framework embraces the complexities of the data and the research context while allowing for the theoretical framework to guide how the themes emerge. Braun and Clarke (2016) explain that there is no widely agreed-upon definition of a theme in qualitative thematic analysis. They also speak to the notion of "theme discovery" (p. 740) and caution against positivist approaches suggesting themes already exist in the data. The interpretive aspect of the current research was considered within the study's theoretical framework. As the cohort of participants were diverse and their experiences reflected this, the analysis addressed coding reliability and incorporated reflexivity in the latter phases of the analysis process. Specifically, the approach to qualitative data analysis used in this study, as informed by Braun and Clarke's process, is outlined in Table 1, below:

Table 1: *Phases and Processes of Qualitative Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006,) p. 87.*

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Informed by the theoretical framing, phases 1-4 focused on Indigenous voices and stories (Rigney, 2006) (but also, not discounting aspects of data based on researcher ascribed value) with an emphasis on participant knowledge and skills across contexts (home, communities, peers, social groups, school) (Moll et al., 1992; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 2005). Inductive (bottom-up) and deductive (top-down) approaches were used in this process, allowing for an examination in response to the research questions and any other new essential knowledge and insights from the participants that emerged (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

The key findings are reported under the research questions: 'What are the issues Aboriginal adults face as they transition to life beyond school, including the workplace?' and 'What can be done to better prepare Aboriginal people in remote communities for the workplace and life?' We will report the themes that emerged in applying Funds of Knowledge to our analysis.

The Issues Faced by Aboriginal Adults from Remote Communities as they Transition to Life Beyond School.

Three themes emerged regarding transitioning from school to the workplace and life: travel and other geographical constraints, motivators/inspiration, and external challenges. Figure 1 illustrates the themes and sub-themes of how participants talked about their experiences navigating life beyond school.

Figure 1: *Three Themes and Subthemes of Navigating Life Beyond School*
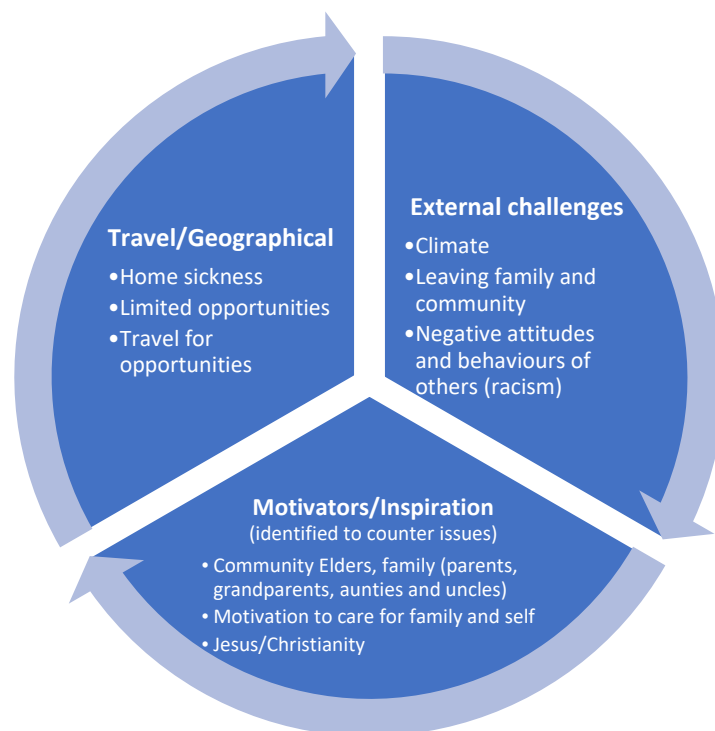
Travel and Geographical Constraints. The first theme of 'travel/geographical constraints' reflects the remoteness and distances travelled by the participants, what it meant for them to leave home to access remote education, and the implications as they transitioned to life after school. While many participants identified limited opportunities due to the remoteness of their home communities, some young people reflected that the school afforded them opportunities and developed their approach to life: "*Growing up in different places taught me that there's more*

to see out there around the world. So, I didn't really have that deep connection with home, so I was pretty much adventurous." From other participants' self-reports, overcoming 'homesickness' when going to boarding school (e.g., "*Being away from home was not good. I mean we all get homesick*") helped them to navigate their subsequent decision-making regarding work and study choices. In this way, many participants saw homesickness as providing both an initial challenge, but later an opportunity. One participant shared:

> I'm not quite sure if that helped being homesick. But it just shows you the value [they have for their] of community and their families in wanting to better themselves with their education and being a long way from home to do that.

External Challenges. Similarly, the second theme, 'external challenges,' described how the boarding school's location's cold weather impacted many participants, and there was a connection between the contrast in the weather from participant's home communities and their wellbeing and motivation. One participant talked about their experience at Kutja School as: "*It was really good when it was there… [but it] was a bit cold for me.*" Although the cold was challenging, others took it in their stride: "*The weather was very cold – it was a change for us.*" Therefore, once again the experience set them up for living and working outside their communities as they transitioned to life after school or at least confirmed where they wanted to live and work.

The experience of dealing with the 'negative behaviours' of others within their learning environment helped them to develop the skill of making good life choices. One participant discussed the effects of other young people:

> *I don't want to be hanging out with kid brain (immature) people I just like to be, you know… kid brain people can get on your nerves. So being kid brain just gets in your way, stop what you are doing… it just stops you halfway or halfway through your year. So, I decided to fight it.*

This was reinforced by another participant who shared the impact of other students and their influence: "Bad things for me was one of my first things was hanging with wrong crew that was addicted to smoking and yeah getting into trouble with them." This person learnt to choose who to socialise with not only at school, but in other parts of their life.

The term racism was not used in any of the stories. However, experiences of discrimination were implied in some stories, particularly about the challenges they faced in their journeys when leaving their home communities to access education and then when they transitioned to work. One participant shared: "*I think the hardest thing [about going to work] would be having to navigate the negativity side of things. We do have to work through a lot of things with our wider community in regard to reconciliation*"**.** Given the evidence regarding racism in education settings that Indigenous peoples face (Bodkin Andrews et al., 2021), it was surprising this issue did not feature more in the stories. However, it may be that their experiences at boarding school built upon their individual resilience in ways that minimised the impact of racism.

Motivators and Inspiration. The final theme to emerge was what 'motivated and inspired' participants. Community Elders and family members were frequently cited as inspirational role models. One participant said: "*I look up to my Elders cos I learn more off them about my land and culture, where I'm from and language group and all that.*" Another participant explained:

> *My role model in my community would be some of my Elders, like my Aunty, who's a Christian woman and she has always been encouraging me since day one. Encouraging to do a lot of things that I thought I couldn't do in my life. I'd say my grandmother because she was a strong lady and always wanting something better for us. Also, for them always sharing knowledge to us and I reckon that where I get it from my great-grandmother and my*

grandmother. They sharing their knowledge with me and then me I'd like to share my knowledge to the young generation. Yeah, there have been a lot of role models in my life.

A further example was a participant who shared:

My role model in my community was my dad 'cause he gave me the work ethic to get up and don't sit down. You got all those skill and stuff like that and knowledge and don't let it go to waste since you went to schooling to get it. So, he is my role model, I always saw him working all his life.

Another participant also indicated:

My role model was my dad—well really my parents. Like I wouldn't be down here and far away if it wasn't for parents to make that sacrifice of sending me a long way, so I'd say they are my role models.

One participant talked about the importance of knowing who your supporters are and recognising strengths from communities when adjusting to a new environment:
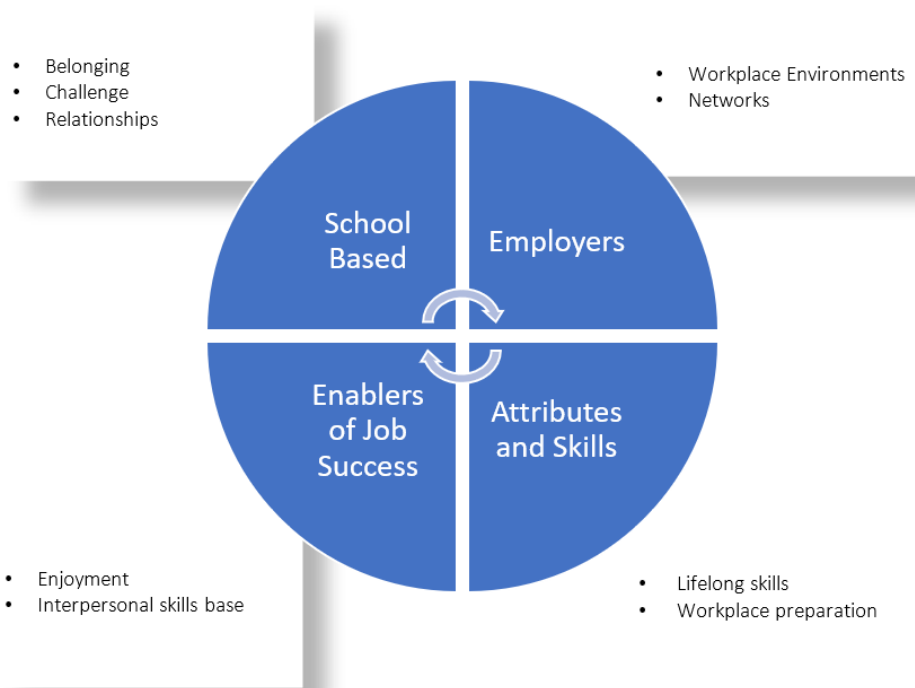
I had people around me as well like who I knew who was there to encourage me. I think that was a good part of it was having someone there I already knew. You know coming from a small community, you don't really want to explore outside the bubble when you are in an Indigenous community, you wanna stay in your familiar surroundings. So having those people I already knew from my community there (at Kutja) it made things a bit more comfortable for me, I guess. I had support from them and the hostel parents. Keeping me grounded I guess, and you know encouraging me to finish off the year or at least stick it out for the next couple of months to see how I like it.

Hence, the experience of boarding and the support that was provided by staff and especially by peers helped the participants to develop the type of resilience needed as they transitioned to life beyond school.

What can be Done to Better Prepare Aboriginal People in Remote Communities for the Workplace and for Life?

In understanding how education providers can better prepare Aboriginal people from remote communities for the workplace and for life, analysis revealed four distinct themes: 'school-based aspects', 'employers', 'attributes and skills', and 'enablers of job success.' These four themes are illustrated in Figure 2:

Figure 2: *Workplace Preparation Findings*

- Belonging
- Challenge
- Relationships

- Workplace Environments
- Networks

School Based — **Employers**

Enablers of Job Success — **Attributes and Skills**

- Enjoyment
- Interpersonal skills base

- Lifelong skills
- Workplace preparation

School-based. The 'school-based aspects' theme includes participants' experiences that both challenged them, but also helped them after school. Within this theme there are three sub-themes: 'belonging', 'challenges', and 'relationships.' These aspects and what they got out of the related experience featured in almost all the stories of the participants. Within the sub-theme of 'belonging,' many participants discussed the concept of *home*, or as one person said: *"Kutja is like a home to me even when you are far away…Kutja can be like a second home."* Another participant explained: *"My best memory of Kutja was spending time with family, you know, your brothers and sisters (cousins) are on the dorm and (with) the dorm staff, with the teachers and going to camps. Just spending quality time."* One young man shared his perspective about the notion of brotherhood and its importance in creating a sense of home: *"Coming to Kutja was like a second home for me and in the dorm with the other boys well we were all like a band of brothers. Look after each other, help each other."*

The second sub-theme concerned the 'challenges' the participants encountered. The expectations of the staff were reflected upon but mostly framed in a positive way. One participant noted that: *"Kutja can give you everything, but as long as you listen. Which is not that hard, it's so easy. Kutja made me better by giving me some rules…understand them by listening, and I start learning."* Another participant shared: *"Respect the property and the teachers, and they will respect you. Just be more confident and speak your mind, (say) what's troubling you and what other stuff needs to be improved at Kutja."* It was implied that this was a positive thing and would support students later in life.

The final sub-theme, one that surfaced in most stories, was 'relationships,' encompassing relationships with students, staff, teachers, dorm parents, and employers. One participant said: *"You are with your friends, and you all become one,"* while another said their school was: *"like a second home to me, with the people around me I had a lot of respect and love. They were like family (and) treated me like one too. I never thought Kutja would be like this for me."* The same participant expanded on this: *"The good things were getting to know other students, girls and boys. Meeting new friends – meeting them – and working together as a team. Yeah, doing new*

things that I haven't done in life before". One participant talked about the level of care at school and the importance of that care:

> *I'm disabled see and they used to watch me and protect me. I thank all the staff for* looking over me. Every time I went to school, I would have problems with my knees get cold and thing. It was a bit challenging during the years (as time) went by everything started to work out. I start to like going back there you know, it was good.

Employers. The second theme 'employers' referred to the role of various employers. The educational 'workplace experience' emerged as a sub-theme and examples emerged about how workplace environment impacted the participants' later experiences. One participant discussed his work placement via the school where the employer encouraged him to pursue an apprenticeship:

> *Because I had been doing work placement and going to work just about every day of the week until one day my boss had a chat to me about how to go on as an apprentice. And so, I said yes that will be a big step and a good opportunity, so I got something lined up after work. So… made me realise that Kutja really helped me out going on work placement and (helping me) find better opportunities.*

Another participant also spoke positively about their workplace experience: "*Work experience was good for me there; I learned a lot from it*". Another described the opportunities and employment outcomes as: "*money, freedom, getting to know new people to be good for my community*".

The second sub-theme was 'networks' and highlighted the participants' connections with different families, communities, workplaces, and schools and how these assisted in their vocational opportunities after school. The power of networking was noted by one participant: "*You meet a lot of good people that you know you wouldn't meet back home.*" Others discussed their home community networks they developed 'on Country' (i.e., on their traditional lands).

Attributes and Skills. 'Attributes and skills' was the third theme to emerge, with the two sub-themes being 'lifelong skills' and 'workplace preparation.' The subtheme of 'lifelong skills' was identified, with some participants recognising the strength and knowledge they took to the school through their culture and identities. One participant discussing role models shared how their family: "*taught me a lot about Country and never forget where you come from. Just teach me from the bottom to the top about respect—I reckon for old people and the country.*" Many young people valued learning how to establish a routine. Others talked about learning skills like how to apply for important documents as a birth certificate and a driver's licence. One participant shared that they learned lifelong skills like how to purchase: "*my own car and learning how to save and be wise with money and not spend it on smoking and drinking and (to) want a better life.*"

The second subtheme of 'workplace preparation' referenced the vocational certificates offered by Kutja School and how the participants valued these for preparing them for the workplace. One participant shared that they: "*got a cert II in CALM and then did a cert 1 in hospitality.*" Another participant talked about the value of applying for and being granted a 'white card' (a health and safety certificate to allow access to construction sites), while another participant talked about the value of skills such as working in the metal and engineering area.

Enablers of job success

The final theme to emerge was 'enablers of job success.' These are factors that participants said helped them to achieve success and ones they were eager to share with the next generation of young people. The two sub-themes to emerge under this include: 'enjoyment' and 'interpersonal skills.' The first sub-theme of enjoyment was described by some of the participants as making sure that a person is passionate about what they are doing while having fun. One participant shared this about their workplace story:

"[going to work] just getting up just have that routine going that you're going to have a good day, that keeps you motivated. That you'll have good mates out there working with you and you just know that you'll have a good day. It's more like having fun, you have fun at your job you'll like it more and then you'll want to get up every day, want to do it more and soon as you get that you can't stop."

The second sub-theme referenced the interpersonal skills the participants felt were important to enable young people transitioning into the workplace. Most frequently mentioned were effective communication skills, building confidence, speaking up, and not "getting shame." Shame is "an expression akin to embarrassment or feeling shy or 'bad' because you have been singled out, sometimes for doing or saying the wrong thing" (Oliver & Exell, 2020, p.824). One participant felt that: "*one of the qualities I think Kutja School help me with is being able to talk to people from different backgrounds. I mean, we did come from different communities…*" Another person shared the importance of learning how to care for themselves:

You got to learn to look after yourself if you want to better yourself you've got to stop drinking and if you've got a young family you've got to provide for your family, and you got to learn to grow your family up the proper way and you've to limit yourself with grog and what not. Learn to love and respect yourself, and you got to respect others as well. It's all about growing, and it's all about life.

On not getting shame, one participant shared:

giving me confidence to speak out, not being shame or sitting back and (to) have a voice. Be strong in what you want, so have the confidence. I came here to Kutja School as a young fulla, quite a young fulla. But yeah, the confidence it gave me for speaking out.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data collected provides critical insights for Indigenous education, particularly for remote and very remote communities. Whilst there is an existing body of literature, minimal studies use the theoretical lens of Indigenist theory and Funds of Knowledge and arts-based methods to privilege Aboriginal people's lived experiences from remote communities to understand their perspectives of navigating life beyond school. Significant data came from the stories about what it was like for Aboriginal young people to leave their communities to access secondary schooling. These data may assist schools in understanding how better to prepare students from remote communities for the workplace.

This study supported on issues such as geography, lack of opportunities in communities, and the challenges presented when people need to leave their home communities to access schooling or employment still remain. A new finding to emerge is the significance of role models and family and how these could be harnessed in building the confidence and skills of students in preparing for the workplace. O'Bryan (2021) points to issues experienced by Aboriginal students in boarding schools, such as the "Eurocentric" way of boarding, culture shock, and identity dissonance, exacerbated by the geographical and cultural differences between the home community and school. The data from our study suggest an urgency in addressing how boarding schools (or schools located in remote communities) can work collaboratively with Elders and communities to draw from the rich knowledge and support they have for their young people to thrive. Our data provide evidence from Aboriginal people from remote communities that counter dominant narratives that persist about challenges in remote communities, as many Elders and families are an incredible source of inspiration for the new generations.

Dockery and Lovell (2016) state that more evidence is needed to show that Aboriginal people from remote communities go out of their way to access education and training. Data from our study shows that Aboriginal people from remote communities do this. Participants in our study

talked comprehensively about how their families supported them to challenge themselves to stay away from home to access education with the hope of gaining employment or continuing further study. There were many examples of participants sharing that they were struggling but continued because their families told them how important education was and how it prepares them for the future.

The workplace preparation data also contributes new knowledge regarding how Aboriginal people from remote communities navigate life beyond school. The two key enablers of job success were enjoyment and interpersonal skills, aspects not often recognised in the development of program and policy approaches. Hence, there are significant implications for how education providers and governments might incorporate these aspects into future strategies to address workplace preparation. Furthermore, how participants described life and interpersonal skills as critical is rarely discussed in the literature on policy approaches to improving education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal people from remote communities.

The research design impacted the knowledge that emerged from a study exploring the experiences of Aboriginal people from remote communities in navigating life beyond school. However, critiques of Funds of Knowledge point to the fact that there is still a mediator (the researcher) on what knowledge is recognised as valid or essential (David, 2016). Cognisant of this, the current research adopted a slow reflexive qualitative thematic analysis to account for positionality subjectivities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The investigation by the core research team was cross analysed by the student co-researchers. The risks will never be fully mitigated, but undertaking the study in such a way allowed the participants' voices to be at the forefront, proactively reducing the risk of misidentifying Funds of Knowledge from the stories told by the participants. A further limitation of our findings is that this study only included a select group of Aboriginal people from remote communities in Western Australia. The research team acknowledges the vast cultural, linguistic, historical, contemporary, and geographical diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples nationally and that these findings are not intended to homogenise the experiences of Indigenous peoples in remote communities.

Indigenous-informed knowledge and Indigenous-centric theories and methodologies are needed to reshape policy and practice approaches to support improved outcomes for Indigenous peoples in remote communities (Shay et al., 2022b). Our findings provide new insights into how Indigenous people from remote communities draw from strengths and existing knowledge from their home communities in navigating complex challenges such as life after school.

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