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Indigenous Education In Australia:  
Policy, Participation and Praxis

Marnie O'Bryan, Prof. Mark Rose

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

*The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.*

*Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.*

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# Volume 4, Issue 1

## Indigenous Education In Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis

### Guest Editors

*Marnie O'Bryan*

*Prof. Mark Rose*

### THEME

This special edition of the UNESCO Observatory E-Journal focuses on education for and about the First Peoples of Australia and bears witness to the many faces of Indigenous education in Australia. It testifies to a complex landscape; places on a map, places in minds and places in spirit that taken together present a snapshot of the tone and dimension of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in early 2015.

Indigenous education policy is framed by a bi-partisan commitment to 'closing the gap'. In some instances, Indigenous leaders are framing the debate over how this is best achieved. At the same time, non-Indigenous educators are increasingly becoming aware that equality and mutual respect can only be established once the Australian community opens its mind to the ancient wisdom and the true stories of this place. Many of the articles in this publication identify the 'gap' as an epistemological divide and argue that, like any bridge, education measures aimed at 'closing the gap' need to be constructed simultaneously from both sides. To that end, a number of papers focus on initiatives being developed and explored by mainstream schools to give authentic voice to the perspectives of First Australians for the benefit of non-Indigenous students.

### COVER ART

*Majority Rule*  
Michael Cook

*Courtesy of the artist  
and Andrew Baker  
Art Dealer, Brisbane*

The papers in Volume One, '**Indigenous Education in Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis**', are all concerned with how Western educational structures and institutions work for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Volume Two of the Journal is entitled '**Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions**'. Each of the articles in this volume pertains to the education experiences of people living in remote Australia.

The articles in this publication take the reader through a rich multidisciplinary tapestry that points to the breadth and complexity of the Indigenous education landscape in Australia today. The papers are honest and true to the heterogeneous communities that are the First Peoples of Australia. Similarly, the poetry and artworks that appear here bear witness to the breadth, depth and diversity of artistic talent and tradition in this country. Taken together, they challenge the reader to move beyond a simplistic quest for 'the silver bullet' to redress disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They encourage reflection, innovation, reciprocity, respect and empowerment through education.

We recommend each and every article.

Prof. Mark Rose & Marnie O'Bryan  
Guest Editors

# Transition from Remote Indigenous Community to Boarding School: The Lockhart River Experience.

**Richard Stewart**  
*James Cook University*

## ABSTRACT

The transition from the remote Indigenous community of Lockhart River in Cape York to boarding school is a fact of life for students when they complete Year 7. With the transition to boarding school, Lockhart River mirrors remote Indigenous communities throughout Cape York and the Torres Strait, and remote regions in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Access for remote Indigenous students to quality education provision in major urban centres is a key element of government policy in addressing disadvantage in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Despite this, there is little in the way of recent research into the transition process in terms of its effectiveness in ensuring the delivery of a quality secondary education. The proposed study will use qualitative methods to examine the transition from the remote Indigenous community of Lockhart from the perspective of the students and their parents and care-givers. A case study methodology conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements for working with Indigenous communities utilizing interviews and the analysis of relevant documents will be utilized in order to 'go inside' the experience and provide detailed participant perspectives on the transition to boarding school. It is hoped that the proposed research will work to engage and empower the community and make a contribution to the debate regarding the importance of maximizing the opportunities for success for Indigenous students who are required to be educated well away from their home communities.

**AUTHOR  
POSITIONALITY**

I come to this space as an interested observer with direct and indirect experience of how the transition process impacts upon the lives of those involved. I am currently working in a residential care facility for Indigenous secondary school-aged boys from remote communities in Cape York, the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Torres Strait who attend a variety of schools in Cairns. Experience working in and teaching in remote Indigenous communities where transition to boarding schools is the 'norm' and extensive experience in the administration and management of Commonwealth Government Indigenous education programs in remote communities in Cape York and the Torres Strait, including Lockhart River, have shaped my view that the transition process merits much closer investigation and research than has been the norm to this point in time. There is particular scope for culturally appropriate and respectful research which privileges an 'insider view' and which draws upon the rich traditions of phenomenological research with its capacity to focus on the perspectives of those most impacted upon by a particular phenomenon, in this case, the transition from a remote Indigenous community to a boarding environment which is distant in terms of both culture and geography.

## INTRODUCTION

Each year over 500 Indigenous students from Cape York in Far North Queensland and the communities of the Torres Strait leave their home communities to attend boarding school in a variety of locations in Queensland and interstate. A significant number of these students do not successfully complete their first year of studies away from home, let alone their Year 12 studies. For them, the experience of being away from their families and home communities, their school and boarding school experience sees them prematurely disengaged from formal education returning to their home communities where their options with respect to formal education are severely limited. This occurrence is most recently documented in the Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation 2012:

*...50 per cent of secondary school aged students from Aurukun who are supported to attend boarding school return to Aurukun as a result of a de-enrolling event.(this includes self-exclusion, parent withdrawal, exclusion or cancellation of enrolment. On returning to Aurukun, a significant number of school-aged children do not enroll at the Aurukun campus of the CYAAA and are therefore not enrolled at any school (Australian Government, 2012).*

While there are a range of financial, material and human supports available to students in making the transition from remote communities to boarding school, there is little evidence of any rigor around an assessment of these supports, especially from the perspective of students and their families. Further to this, there has been little in the way of recent research which points to any searching analysis of the quality of boarding school providers in terms of their capacity to successfully engage, retain and educate the Indigenous children in their care. As a consequence, there continues to be an unacceptably high level of disengagement which goes largely unchallenged at the levels of systems and policy development, implementation and analysis.

The body of current literature on Indigenous education is vast. Indigenous education features prominently and regularly in our national daily, The Australian, where there exists a particular focus on the apparent success of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (A.I.E.F.) in ensuring Indigenous students successfully complete Year 12. As recently as October 13 2014, the Australian featured a story on how the A.I.E.F. was able to demonstrate a 93% Year 12 completion rate while

‘many government and not-for –profit initiatives had failed.’ In addition, a range of issues are canvassed in a range scholarly journals which deal with a broad range of educational issues and research including The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education which has a specific focus on the Indigenous domain. However, even the most cursory of searches on literature pertaining to the topic of transition to boarding school for Indigenous students from remote communities reveals significant gaps in terms of contemporary research, despite the fact that for many Indigenous children in Queensland, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia the only opportunities for a comprehensive secondary education lie outside of their home communities.

## THE REMOTE CONTEXT

Any analysis of the issues confronting Indigenous students transitioning from remote Indigenous communities into boarding school must in the first instance state clearly what is meant by the term ‘remote’ as it is a term often used without any clear definition. In the modern Australian context, ‘remote areas’ are defined in the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) developed by the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics). The remoteness of a particular community or location is determined using the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). The ABS generates an average ARIA score for each community or location based on its distance from population centres of various sizes. Remoteness areas comprise six categories as follows: (1) major cities of Australia; (2) inner regional Australia; (3) outer regional Australia; (4) remote Australia; (5) very remote Australia and (6) migratory regions (comprising off-shore, shipping and migratory places) (Australian Government, 2011).

An articulation of the definitions and their application is important in this context. There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that while considerable progress is being made in improving education outcomes for Indigenous Australians across the board, serious issues continue to exist for students in and from communities classified as remote or very remote. The Prime Minister’s Closing the Gap Report 2013 reflected current research in stating clearly and unambiguously that across a range of indicators, a much larger gap exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in remote and very remote areas than in metropolitan areas (Australian Government, 2013). Stewart and Abbott-Chapman (2011) provide a concise summary of the current situation in arguing that,

*...in rurally remote Australia students who suffer the twin disadvantages of rurality, especially rural isolation, and low socio-economic status have been shown by research to be most under-represented in post-compulsory education, to a degree which has changed little over the last fifteen years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (indigenous) students in rural and remote areas of Australia suffer the greatest inequalities in educational outcomes (p.2)*

In some remote and very remote communities the levels of educational and wider societal disadvantage as measured by a range of indicators are potentially masked when data are used which pertains to the Indigenous population generally. For example, while the proportion of Indigenous Australians who have completed Year

12 rose from 19.4% in 2001 to 25.4% in 2011 (Biddle, 2012), the situation in Wadeye, a remote indigenous community in the Northern Territory, is such that the community is 'more at risk of prolonged dependency due to almost wholesale disengagement from schooling' (Taylor, 2010, p.6).

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

## THE CONCEPT OF TRANSITION

In order to understand the totality of the transition experience for children from remote communities such as Lockhart River in Cape York in Far North Queensland, it is important to state clearly what we mean by the term 'transition.' Griebel and Niesel state that

*transitions have been identified as phases of life changes connected with developmental demands that require intensified and accelerated learning and that are socially regulated. They are also characterized as phases of heightened vulnerability. In a child's life, transitions can be the birth of a sibling, parental separation, puberty, and, last not least, transitions into educational institutions (2005, p.6).*

The developmental demands that accompany transitions are intensified in adolescence, where biological, cognitive and social-emotional changes including changing relationships with parents and peers occur simultaneously with the move from primary to secondary or middle school (Roeser; Eccles and Sameroff 2000, p. 443). The capacity of individuals to negotiate successfully the demands of transitions in adolescence is closely tied to concepts of resilience and the acquisition and practice of appropriate coping strategies (Stein, 2005). Where young people are able to manage transitions appropriately and successfully, their competencies are strengthened and subsequent transitions will be less problematic, whereas 'problems with coping and maladjustment raise the probability that subsequent transitions will not be coped with adequately' (Neisel and Griebel, 2005, p.7).

Firth; Couch and Everiss (2009), state that transitions, particularly in adolescence, are dynamic and ongoing. They also state that the transition is a theoretically complex field of study that has largely been studied through the lens of the ecological model of child development articulated by Urie Bronfenbrenner. They argue that the ecological approach provides an appropriately comprehensive framework for exploring the complexity of the transition process through its focus on interaction,



interrelatedness and human agency (p.6). The view that geographical transitions in early adolescence, wherein young adolescents move from essentially rural or remote areas into urban areas, are accompanied by feelings of anxiety, homesickness and increased stress, is a common theme in the Australian literature (Bramston and Patrick 2004; Brown 2001; Stewart and Abbot-Chapman 2011).

In this context it is important to state that the transition from remote Indigenous community to boarding school must be viewed as a complex process with a number of distinct elements. Chief among these are: the transition from a remote Indigenous community with a generally small population (under 1,000) to a larger urban centre often with a school population of over 1,000 students; the transition from an environment where an Indigenous world view dominates into an environment where a non-Indigenous world view is the norm; the transition from a non-English speaking environment into an English speaking environment; the transition from primary to secondary school, often from a small community primary school to a very big secondary school; and the transition from a family-centred environment to a school/boarding environment and the transition from childhood to adolescence.

In the broader transition context, limited research has been conducted into the transition made by adolescents who leave rural centres to continue their secondary studies in urban centres. In assessing the transition experience for non-Indigenous adolescents in South East Queensland, Patrick, Bramston and Wakefield (2007) found that about one-quarter of students did not appear well prepared for 'the rigors of rural/urban adjustment' (2007, p.228). Downs (2001) compared the transition experience in terms of the experience of the move from primary to secondary school for boarding and day students at a school in Far North Queensland and found that while some aspects of the transition could be expected to be stressful, 'the majority of the young adolescents generally perceived the experience of the transition to secondary school positively, with emphasis on social interaction' (p.343). The view that the experience of transitioning from primary school in rural locations to secondary education in urban settings demands considerable skills in terms of adjustment and the acquisition of coping and resilience skills is supported in what is a limited body of research literature (Stewart and Abbott-Chapman 2011; Patrick, Bramston and Wakefield 2007). As Brown (2001) states,

*It appears that very little research has been conducted in Australia on how the transition to secondary school is perceived by young adolescents. Similarly, there is a paucity of literature on the effects of relocation with regards to social experience, especially within the context of students starting boarding school (p.343).*

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

*the transition from primary to secondary school can be particularly stressful for Indigenous youth, particularly those who are forced to leave their community to continue their formal education. Cultural, social and language differences, being inadequately*

*prepared, being away from familiar support and feeling shame at not having higher achievement levels may lead to anxiety and school leaving (2010, p.108).*

## **ESTABLISHING THE POLICY CONTEXT**

In terms of the current policy context, research into the transition experience is positioned clearly in the broader context of the Australian Government's 'Closing the Gap' strategy. In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments committed to a national approach to addressing Indigenous disadvantage through a clear and directed focus in a number of key areas. Because this study seeks to inform policy, it is important to begin by listing and problematizing the current policy statements that influence education and the boarding school context. The Council of Australian Government (2008) sets out six targets which are aimed to provide definitive indicators of progress towards addressing levels of disadvantage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Two of the targets have a very close relationship with issues around transition to boarding, namely closing the gap in literacy and numeracy and closing the gap in Year 12 completion outcomes. Further to this, research points to the very clear relationship that exists between factors such as engagement with structured early learning programs and literacy and numeracy outcomes, and the obvious link between successful completion of Year 12 or its equivalent and subsequent employment and life outcomes (Biddle 2011; Hughes & Hughes 2012; Johns 2006).

An articulation of the Closing the Gap targets is important in that it highlights a consistent narrative around Indigenous Australians and education, namely that of consistent 'disparity' in outcomes and a subsequent need to 'remedy' entrenched disadvantage. In assessing a raft of programs designed to address this disadvantage and deficit, Beresford and Gray state that 'the experience of educational reform for Australia's Indigenous students has been one largely, although not exclusively, of failure' (2008, p. 197). However, generalizations about progress or the lack of progress in addressing educational disadvantage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are difficult to sustain without reference to particular geographic regions or sub-groups within the Indigenous population, or indeed without reference to specific indicators or outcomes. For example, there is clear evidence to suggest that 'Indigenous school completion rates have greatly improved, both in absolute terms and compared with white Australians, but a new study warns that there are still large gaps in all regions apart from the Torres Strait' (Karvelas 2013). Further to this, recent reports of the outstanding successes being enjoyed in terms of Year 12 completion by Indigenous students who are supported in boarding schools by programs such as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, the Cape York Higher Expectations Program and the Yalari Foundation, (Ferrari 2013; Karvelas 2013; Morton 2013; Robinson 2013), stand in sharp contrast to the situation experienced by students from remote and very remote communities where it is difficult to distinguish between those who have disengaged from secondary school per se and those who are unsuccessful in the transition to boarding school (Johns 2006, p.18).

In the Queensland context, the recently released discussion paper, Development of a Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood, School Education, Training, tertiary Education and Employment Action Plan 2013-2016, stated that between 2009 - 2012 school literacy and achievement data showed that the gap in student outcomes had not substantially reduced. Most disturbingly it commented that,

*The gap in school attendance between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students in Queensland schools has remained the same since 2008, while the gap in apparent retention from Year 10 to Year 12 across all Queensland schools is actually widening (Queensland Government 2013, p.5).*

The situation outlined in the Queensland report has significant implications for any examination of the transition experience. The gap in literacy and numeracy outcomes implies that students are leaving remote communities without the skills necessary to participate in the educational mainstream, while the gap in attendance and school retention implies that levels of student disengagement from school are unacceptably high.

In examining a range of issues and questions relevant to addressing educational disadvantage in the Indigenous context, Biddle (2011) states that there are a number of important school-related research questions that we really know very little about. In terms of this research, the most significant question he presents is 'Do Indigenous children who attend boarding schools in cities as opposed to their local schools in regional or remote areas have better outcomes than if they stayed where they were?' (p.22). He argues that there are significant gaps in both the qualitative and quantitative data upon which policies or interventions to address disadvantage can be based.

The view that there are indeed significant gaps in the literature and research around the transition from remote community to boarding school is a common theme; while there are a variety of views and comments expressed in a range of forums, solid research based evidence supported by either qualitative or quantitative data is lacking (Australian Government 2012; Catholic Education Commission of New South Wales 2008; Mander 2012; Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body 2004).

## **TRANSITION TO BOARDING SCHOOL: DAVID MANDER**

The most important recent contribution to the literature in this field is David Mander's 2012 Doctoral Thesis, 'The Transition Experience to Boarding School for Male Aboriginal Secondary School Students from Regional and Remote Communities Across Western Australia.' While not focusing exclusively on students from remote Indigenous communities, Mander's work is important for a number of reasons. Chief among these is his focus on researching the perspectives on transitions of students, parents and staff of the schools. Working across five non-government boarding schools in Perth, Mander interviewed a wide cross-section of staff to elicit the views of those engaged in leadership, classroom, and boarding support roles, including those of Indigenous support workers and specialist staff including one school psychologist. In all, Mander documented the perspectives of thirty two students, eleven parents and sixteen staff.

With respect to the selection of students for his research, Mander does not distinguish between students from regional and remote communities and his attention is focused on male students only. Given the issues of particular relevance to the remote or very remote context, it is clear that, while significant, Mander's work cannot be applied to communities such as Lockhart River without acknowledging that there will be some significant points of difference in a number of areas such as the extent to which English is the first language of students; the strength of traditional culture; the extent to which the importance of education is acknowledged in the students' communities; and factors pertaining to the nature of primary education in the students' home communities.

In assessing the literature pertinent to his research, he points clearly to the lack of rigorous and systematic analysis of the transition. He states that

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

He speaks of a 'paucity in research' despite the fact that a range of previous reports conducted by a range of government supported and sponsored agencies, including the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission in 2000 which stated forcefully that 'where boarding school was seen as the only secondary school alternative for Aboriginal children in remote communities across the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, it was seldom a successful transition' (p.78).

Mander's research provides great insights into the way in which participants in the transition process perceive the move from a rural or remote environment into one which is different on so many fronts. Both students and parents viewed the move to school in Perth as an opportunity to succeed, despite concerns about home sickness, culture shock and, in the case of students from the warmer climates of the Pilbara and the Kimberley, 'climate shock.' (p.153) Reservations about losing connection to culture and cultural identity were voiced consistently by parents and older students who were conscious of the tension between making the most of an opportunity to succeed in a high performing education environment and a potential loss of connection to country, people and ceremony. Teacher perspectives were often dominated by concerns about the level of readiness for secondary school, especially in terms of deficits in academic ability and the impact of this on students' capacity to engage with a demanding curriculum in a sustained manner. (p.214)

In articulating the implications of his work and discussing future directions, Mander highlights a number of dominant themes around the disparity between the standard and quality of local schooling compared with metropolitan Perth and the subsequent view of parents that boarding school presented an opportunity to overcome structural educational inequality and thus a chance to optimize life experiences. Most tellingly however, he states that the transition presents challenges not only for students and families but equally for the practices of boarding schools in Western Australia. Schools must work to develop an environment that embraces diversity and also ensure staff are appropriately skilled in terms of their capacity to engage productively with Indigenous children. Further to this, in highlighting the need to

focus on the development and maintenance of appropriate engagement strategies and actions he argues that, if boarding is the only viable option in remote Australia, governments must facilitate much greater opportunities for families and schools to form strong positive bonds (p.259).

## **TRANSITION AS THE NORM: THE WILSON REVIEW IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

Presented to the Northern Territory Government in 2014, the Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory prepared by education consultant Bruce Wilson devotes significant space to discussions regarding the inadequacy of secondary education provision in remote locations and the subsequent need to focus on boarding in regional locations as ‘the solution’ to improving education outcomes across the board for students from remote communities. The review states that ‘despite reservations, there is now a growing view that residential and boarding facilities are a viable solution’ (2014, p.147). In a rather revealing comment on the inadequacy of any real research or evidence base, the review goes on to state that ‘in the longer term, it is anticipated that residential facilities will become increasingly acceptable once good data and information are available about their effect on student achievement’ (2014, p. 149). Given that Indigenous students have been leaving remote communities to attend boarding schools for decades it is somewhat surprising that as late as 2014 we are still waiting for data to become available.

The Wilson Review is significant in this context for a number of reasons. There is reference to ‘anecdotal accounts’ of how students attending boarding facilities have encountered significant issues with homesickness and a host of other barriers which impacted upon their ability to complete secondary studies but no reference to credible research upon which to validate the anecdotal accounts. The Northern Territory Government has seized upon the review recommendations in allocating \$40 million over 5 years for the development of boarding facilities in urban and regional centres in order that students from remote communities will be able to take advantage of more comprehensive secondary offerings than those available in their home communities. The decision with respect to such a significant resource allocation has been made without reference to research data which can articulate what works best in the boarding context, apart from the mandatory references to Noel Pearson and his views that quality secondary education in the bush is an unattainable dream. There is certainly no reference in the Wilson Review to any research which articulates the experience of community members of the Northern Territories remote communities, including the experiences of the children who have gone away to board.

## **TRANSITION TO BOARDING SCHOOL: OTHER LITERATURE**

Given the reality of the need to transition posed by both the lack of availability and quality of comprehensive secondary education in remote Indigenous communities throughout Australia, it is clear that there is significant scope for further research

similar to that done by Mander. In the Queensland context, there is significant comment around the importance of successful transitions for students from remote indigenous communities.

Duncan (1990) researched the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children transitioning into two non-government boarding schools in Queensland with the aim of determining possible solutions to the problems encountered in maintaining attendance at school. His research identified issues around homesickness, loss of connection to culture and lifestyle and stereotyping and negative attitudes encountered in schools as fundamental to the ability of students to adjust to and succeed in the boarding environment. In commenting on a number of issues and limitations inherent in Duncan's research, Mander (2012) points to a reliance on students' written responses as a possible barrier limiting the potential richness of the data collected. He also states that Duncan's use of observations conducted by a co-researcher as problematic in that 'the lack of proximity to the research topic by the primary author leaves the reader to speculate somewhat over his familiarity and understanding of the wider socio-cultural contexts' (p.77).

In 2004 the Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body (QIECB) released a paper on boarding schools which highlighted the very broad range of issues confronting students and their families in the transition to boarding school. The QIECB paper highlighted the need for research to be undertaken on 'how boarding school policies and strategies impact upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their communities including the identification of policy "gaps" and effective strategies' (p.2). The paper also identified issues around students' school readiness, the capacity of schools to engage in a culturally appropriate way with parents and communities, and the capacity of schools to provide the appropriate levels of resourcing to meet the additional support needs of Indigenous students as key factors impacting upon successful transition.

Many of the themes highlighted from the Queensland experience were explored by the New South Wales Catholic Education Commission in 2008 in a discussion paper entitled 'Supporting Aboriginal Students being Schooled Away from Home.' While focusing on the needs of Aboriginal students from rural and regional New South Wales, the Commission stated that 'while there is an abundance of media comment about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students being educated away from home, there has been very little academic research in this area.' (p.4). The discussion paper pointed to issues around levels of support, school readiness and the skills sets required of school teaching and boarding staff among a very wide range of considerations or preconditions that must be met if students are to be given the best possible chance of success in completing their secondary education. While the discussion paper makes reference to the contributions made by Aboriginal students enrolled at St Ignatius College Riverview in Sydney, there is little in the way of an articulation of their perspectives on the transition into boarding school. Further to this, the Indigenous students enrolled at Catholic schools in New South Wales are in the majority from rural or regional centres, not from remote communities.

In terms of comment relevant to the transition from the remote Indigenous community context which attempts to articulate the experience from a participant perspective, McCoy (2011), writes that from his experience and his discussions with

young Indigenous Australians, many of them working in the remote Kimberley context, that the transition to boarding school is often characterized by a sense of shame and alienation. He writes that while remote communities and their parents and care-givers have high hopes for their young people who leave to pursue a quality education, these hopes are often not realized. 'Principals, teachers and residential cares respond generously. Yet for many the hoped-for transition often doesn't work' (2011, p.6).

In terms of particular interventions at school level, Perso; Kenyon and Darrough (2012) describe the implementation of a program entitled 'Home Way/St John's Way' implemented at St John's College in Darwin. Confronted by unacceptably high levels of suspensions and exclusions for Indigenous students in boarding, Perso oversaw the development and implementation of a transition program which 'has proved highly successful as measured by a very significant reduction in school suspensions for misbehavior in 2011/2012.' The program drew heavily on addressing a perceived lack of school readiness on the part of younger students from remote Indigenous communities transitioning into boarding school and highlighted the need for schools of the dominant culture to provide culturally appropriate support during transition times (2012, p. 4).

In examining the effectiveness of an education support program for Indigenous students at boarding schools in Perth, Western Australia, Mander and Fieldhouse (2005) stated that new residential students faced a number of significant challenges while studying and living away from home including;

*moving away from a context where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children compose the majority of students into a school, into a situation where they were now the minority. There was also a significant reduction of physical contact with family members from daily contact, to a situation where for extended periods of time physical contact was not possible and communication was limited to telephone, email and other means than through face-to-face-interactions (Mander and Fieldhouse, 2005, p.89).*

## **THE NEED FOR RESEARCH**

An examination of the literature relevant to the transition from remote Indigenous community to boarding school reveals that while there exists a considerable body of literature which speaks to the importance of engaging with secondary education and of completing Year 12 or its equivalent, there has been little in the way of detailed research in the literature around factors which are seen to influence the success or otherwise of the transition to boarding school. As well, there is little in the way of recent research which attempts to 'go inside' the experience of transition and understand the experience of those involved – especially students and their parents and caregivers. On the basis of this, possible program or system responses to these voiced concerns and experiences can be considered. With the exception of the work undertaken by Mander in Western Australia, there has been no detailed research conducted into how the participants in the transition to boarding school view the process. Given that the provision of comprehensive secondary education in Far North Queensland is currently confined to Thursday Island, Bamaga, Weipa and Cooktown, the boarding option will continue to be the sole means by which young

people from remote and very remote communities such as Lockhart River are able to participate in an education comparable to that on offer to students who reside in urban or regional centres.

For young Indigenous men and women from Cape York communities, and from remote Indigenous communities across Australia, failure to complete secondary education to an acceptable level is a reliable indicator of later dependence, disempowerment, incarceration and a range of other negative quality of life indicators. State, Territory and Commonwealth education policy and subsequent resource allocation mean that it will not be possible for young indigenous men and women to participate in a quality comprehensive secondary education in many of their home communities. They will need to transition. Despite the best intentions of many, it is my experience that the transition to boarding school is highly problematic for an unacceptably high number of students from remote Indigenous communities in Cape York and across remote Australia. There is a pressing need for research into how the transition to boarding school is experienced by students, parents and care-givers, school staff and support staff. There is a need to articulate and respond to the factors which lead to unacceptably high levels of disengagement and to learn from the positive experience of students who successfully transition into education outside their home community in order that outcomes are maximized to the benefit of Indigenous students and their home communities.

Further, it is important to acknowledge that the perspective that is often held of Indigenous students' and their 'de-enrolling' and 'disengagement' is seen as educational 'failure' by the dominant Australian culture. The perspective held and voiced is one framed by the dominant culture. It provides little room for understanding the experience from students themselves and their communities. It is possible that the Eurocentric view held of this experience is viewed and constructed quite differently by Indigenous students and their families. The intent of this study is to explore the phenomenon of the transition to boarding school, especially from the lived experience of students and their communities.

## **WHY LOCKHART RIVER?**

The community of Lockhart River is located approximately 800kms north of Cairns on the east coast of Cape York Peninsula. Classified according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics as 'very remote,' Lockhart River's accessibility by road is often an issue for up to 6 months of the year. In the Wet Season the only unsealed road into the community is impassable and access is only possible by air or by sea. The community has a population of 600 who belong to five diverse language groups and for nearly all in the community, English is a second language. In terms of education service provision, Lockhart State School provides a comprehensive primary curriculum and also engages in a modified secondary program to assist those students who, for a range of reasons, are not engaged in secondary education outside the community. At present there are 103 students in the primary school and 15 enrolled in the secondary program. It is the expectation of the community and the Queensland Department of Education that children will transition from Year 7 in Lockhart River to boarding schools in urban centres. In terms of data relevant to Year 12 completion, Lockhart



River has seen marked improvements in recent years but the community still has completion rates significantly below those for all Indigenous Australians. In 2006, 10.3 per cent of persons over 15 years of age who were living in Lockhart River had completed Year 12. By 2011 this figure had risen to 19.1 per cent (Australian Government 2012, p.247).

Further to this, as a non-Welfare Reform community, Lockhart River has not had access to many of the financial benefits that have flowed to communities such as Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge. In terms of all the indices pertinent to measures of disadvantage, Lockhart River features highly and given the strong social justice ethic which will underpin the proposed research there is a clear need to examine why it is that contemporary education service delivery is highly problematic for many residents of Lockhart River community. 2015 is a year of particular significance for education in Queensland in a general sense in that it marks the movement of Year 7 into secondary school as part of official education policy. While a number of schools across the state have already situated Year 7 into the secondary or middle school context, the majority of Year 7 students are still officially classified as primary school students. In the context of the proposed research, this movement of Year 7 into secondary school is of great importance in that students from remote Indigenous communities including Lockhart River will be exiting the community a year earlier.

There exists considerable scope for research which attempts to 'go inside' the transition experience and articulate how it is that the participants themselves, especially students and families see the transition into boarding school. It is a point clearly articulated by Merriam (1998) who stated that

*Research focused on discovery, insight and understanding from the perspective of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education (p.216).*

## CONCLUSION

The remote Indigenous communities of Cape York in Far North Queensland experience educational outcomes well below those of the rest of Australia. By any measure, Lockhart community is one of the remotest communities in Australia and it features highly on a considerable number of indicators socio-economic disadvantage. At the same time it is a community, which is from my perspective, passionate about achieving the 'best' for its children. It is committed, within its capability, to achieving the best means ensuring that the children of Lockhart River have the best possible experience with education, both inside and outside of the community. Policy-makers and resource allocators have determined that transition to boarding school at the end of primary school will be the educational norm for remote Cape York communities such as Lockhart River and that a limited secondary program will only be made available to children who return to the community when the transition fails. In 2015, the transition to boarding school will occur a year earlier and students will leave the community at the end of Year 6.

In a policy and resource sense the supports are there to allow children from the community to access a quality secondary education 'down south.' The reality is however, that a significant number of those who leave the community to be educated, exit secondary school prematurely. There is a pressing need to articulate why this happens and to provide community-driven solutions which are based on valuing the knowledge and experience of the participants in the transition process.

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## ABOUT THE COVER

*Majority Rule*  
Michael Cook

*Courtesy of the artist  
and Andrew Baker  
Art Dealer, Brisbane*



Michael Cook is an award-winning photographer who worked commercially both in Australia and overseas for twenty-five years. In 2009, Cook was drawn into art photography by an increasingly urgent desire to learn about his Indigenous ancestry and explore that aspect of his identity. Cook's first solo art exhibition, *Through My Eyes* (2010), contained images of Australian prime ministers overlaid with the faces of Australian Indigenous. This work explored the potential interconnectedness of generations of Australians and its importance was recognised with selection for the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2011 at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Cook was adopted and brought up in a family who, while not of Indigenous descent, were heavily involved in supporting Indigenous rights. He said, "I was raised with a strong understanding of my Aboriginal ancestry thanks to my parents... When I produce art, I feel a stronger connection with my ancestry. This helps me to understand Australian history-in particular, my history." His Aboriginal heritage informs and extends his art.

Cook's photographic practice is unusual. He constructs his images in a manner more akin to painting than the traditional photographic studio or documentary model. Instead he begins with an idea, regarding the image as his blank canvas. Photographic layering is then used to build the image to provide aesthetic depth. Also, he characteristically works in photographic series. Unfolding tableaux offer enigmatic narratives which are not prescribed but left open to interpretation.

In 2011 he exhibited two new series, *Broken Dreams* and *Undiscovered*, together under the title of *Uninhabited*. Their importance was acknowledged when they were acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and shown in its *UnDisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial*. They show Cook's developing artistic vision in their exploration of incidents from Australian colonial history, both real

and imagined. Visually striking, technically complex and with sensitive invention, Cook's images occupy a new space in the Australian artistic imagination.

His series *Civilised* (2012) was selected to promote The 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7) at Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in 2012, and was included in the ground-breaking *My Country: I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia* (QAGoMA, 2013). Cook's latest body of work, *Majority Rule* (2013), has been selected for inclusion in the international 19th Biennale of Sydney: *You Imagine What You Desire*.

Extract from: Martin-Chew, Louise, *Michael Cook* [ex. cat.], Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, 2013

## MAJORITY RULE- DESCRIPTION

*Majority Rule* is marked by its aesthetic departure from Michael Cook's previous work. While thematic and conceptual connections with some of his earlier series are evident, the setting of this suite is in contrast to the Australian land- and beach-scapes of earlier images.

This is a depiction of the urbane within the urban. Colonial buildings, the style of solid sandstone architecture which may be seen in almost any city in the Western world, paved streets and a city skyline are the backdrop for a black man, dressed in a suit, carrying a briefcase like the archetypal businessman. His figure, in different attitudes, populates the footpath. He is multiplied (in some scenes up to twenty times), a pointer to the unreality of the scene.

Currently, Australia's Indigenous are a small minority, comprising only three to four percent of the total Australian population. Consequently, black faces have little visibility in Australian capital cities and this series of images defies that reality—yet acknowledges it simultaneously with the use of only one model multiple times to build the crowd because, Cook noted, “The reality is it is hard to find models who look characteristically Indigenous. ‘Indigenous’ is many things and physical characteristics have little to do with this identification. So while looking Indigenous has nothing to do with Indigeneity, in my aesthetic I seek out a strong character in a model's physicality.”

The multiple versions of the subject populate generic city locations: a subway tunnel, an old-style bus, and city streets. Old Parliament House and Canberra's High Court are more iconic buildings, and take Cook's protagonist to the seat of Australian political power. As such, Cook's imagery challenges our ingrained belief systems, yet these images do not offer judgement—they are observational, asking questions, setting up lively interactions within their scenes, without proffering neat nor prescriptive conclusions.

Cook noted, “I was never taught Aboriginal history at school, only about the European settlement of Australia. What I learnt in school was similar to the first European settlers' beliefs, with words like ‘natives’ and ‘discovery of Australia’. Looking back now, I realise that it was a false way of teaching, and that it hid the truth about the treatment of Aborigines over the past four hundred years.”

The colour of the man's skin is the disjunction that prompts the viewer to wonder, and then wonder at their own wonder. It becomes a gauge for internalised racism. Australian audiences may ponder why this collection of well-dressed black men in a city street strikes a discordant note, an atmospheric that feels wrong, unusual, discomfiting. The era of the photograph is undefined but feels vintage, retro, with its black and white tonality speaking to our protagonist's clothing—the lapels of his jacket, the flare in his pin-striped trousers, the sober hat, the dark braces over his white shirt and the stately dignity of his bearing, all of which suggest a period up to fifty years ago. Yet there are other references to iconic Western culture—the bowler hat in *Majority Rules (Memorial)* revisits the shape of the anti-hero in the anarchic 1971 Stanley Kubrick film, *A Clockwork Orange*, or a silent Charlie Chaplin-style comedic figure.

In *Majority Rule* Cook poses an insoluble dilemma as he acknowledges the discriminatory nature of society. How it would be if these statistics were reversed? After the explorers arrived in Australia, the Indigenous population was decimated. This was, in part, because Aboriginal people were without immunity to introduced diseases. “The majority always has the rule and the minority doesn't. Then there is racism that arises as a result.”

There is a formality in these works, with strong architectural lines and perspective to a distant vanishing point. *Majority Rule (Bridge)* is suggestive of Raphael's *School of Athens* (Raphael Sanzio, 1509-11). The synergistic connections between variations on the individual, the vanishing points created with the straight lines of the street, footpath pavers and the collection of rectangular assemblages of city buildings and windows provide a stage-like setting for Cook's individuals. The figures standing in the street appear as if alone, and lacking a social or familial relationship to each other in their physical attitudes, yet are visually bound together. Cook may be positing the kind of anomie or normlessness that isolates individuals within community—the type of First World dysfunction that regularly fills the columns of Australian newspapers.

Another image from the series, *Majority Rule (Tunnel)*, records Cook's model in multiple attitudes, standing, static again, in a public transport space generally characterised by rushing—of people and of the wind that echoes through these underground spaces as trains arrive and leave. Individuals are frozen within their tightly composed cocoon of concrete and tiles. This conformity—of dress, behaviour and social norms—is another theme in this series, particularly evident in *Majority Rule (Memorial)*.

Most Western cities have war memorials and in a particularly poignant image, the black businessman ascends and descends the sandstone steps that surround a rotunda-style war memorial in a city centre. The war memorial is sacrosanct returned servicemen's territory. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been involved in fighting for Australia in all wars since the Boer War in 1901 but, while they were paid equally for their work in the armed forces and fought alongside white Australians, on their return home they were subject to the same discrimination they faced before serving their country. Following World War II, only on Anzac Day were they welcomed into returned services league clubs. On other days of the year, Aboriginals might meet their white comrades for a drink but had to stay outside



the building or on the verandah. (It is interesting to note that the right to vote on a country-wide basis was not granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders until 1967.)

Cook's images populate the war memorial with the black faces that have been unacknowledged in Australia's military history. The memorial itself speaks to other colonial buildings in the central business district, its roundness inspired by Grecian classic revival buildings, and Cook's figures occupy the steps, moving up one side and down the other, so as to surround and possess the rotunda.

Cook's use of the bespectacled figure in *Majority Rule* (Parliament) evokes the precedent and dignity of Australia's first Indigenous Member of Parliament, Senator Neville Bonner. In *Majority Rule* (Bus), a figure at the front reads a vintage magazine titled *WALKABOUT*, noting and satirising the stereotypes that have driven popular expectations.

There is a lean aesthetic and increased contemporary edge in this series. Cook's interest in the impact of Australia's history on its original inhabitants comes into sharp focus, and the highly choreographed images are witty, stylish and slick.

LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW, FEBRUARY 2014