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Interschool partnerships: remote Indigenous boarding students experiencing Western education whilst keeping culturally safe

Andrew Lloyd and Tristan Duggie Pwerl
Charles Darwin University, Casuarina, Northern Territory, Australia

ABSTRACT
Secondary education access for remote Northern Territory Indigenous Australian students is limited. Although many students attend boarding schools, few complete Year 12. Whole communities rarely engage in their children’s boarding school education and boarding schools seldom engage with Elders to support a child’s cultural journey. This article presents research findings from interviews conducted with two adults from a very remote Indigenous community and six staff from a partner Western interstate boarding school community. Using a qualitative methodology with phenomenological design, findings show how students achieve Western educational success whilst maintaining their culture and offer implications, including possible model replication, for other communities.

KEYWORDS
Indigenous education; secondary school; remote communities; educational partnerships; culture; cultural safety

Introduction
In one of the most remote places in the Northern Territory, Australia, and indeed the world, lies a small Aboriginal community. This community is some 1800km from an urban, Western boarding school community not far from Adelaide in South Australia. Over time, these communities have formed a partnership. When children travel from their remote Aboriginal community to the Western community, a cultural gulf is traversed. The safety of what was familiar is lost and replaced by an unknown vista and a new world (Benveniste, Dawson, & Rainbird, 2015). Within this world lies an English-speaking culture with new values, a disparate way of how to succeed, rigid routines, a foreign language, and different foods (Bobongie, 2017). Similar experiences across the world have shown that boarding school transitions are fraught with loss of identity and connection to community, often resulting in severe, depreciating changes to a child’s mental health (Akiyama et al., 2013; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017). To survive this experience, children need support systems to generate their inclusion so they can navigate and positively adjust within their temporary world (Alexander-Snow, 2011). They need to hold their language and culture close and open their eyes for a new experience where the goal is the distant concept of a Year 12 or secondary degree completion (Chen, 2010). This experience is not unilateral. Children and school staff from the South Australian...
community visit and learn within the remote Aboriginal community and engage in tradi-
tional Aboriginal culture. For students at either end of the cultural divide, what
counts as “success” in this new world does not equate with successes of the old (Guenther,
2013). As shown in New Zealand and North American contexts, strong community
engagement (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009) and partnerships can bridge this
divide (Finlay, Hardy, Morris, & Nagy, 2010).

Literature review & theory
History of boarding schools: international and Australian evidence

Indigenous boarding has an horrific history. A United Nations comparative study showed
that, over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most governments wanted to assimilate
transitioning Indigenous boarding students into a commanding society (Smith, 2009).
Children were forcibly abducted, deliberately isolated from communities, and assimilated
within boarding schools (Smith, 2009). Abuses happened regularly. In Canada, when chil-
dren were separated from their families, their culture was decimated (MacDonald, 2015).
Residential schools freely allowed a form of cultural genocide (MacDonald, 2015; Truth &
Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Within the United States, patterns of dis-
location and cultural genocide were also prevalent in the late nineteenth century
(Trafzer, Keller, & Sisquoc, 2006).

In Australia, churches and governments removed Indigenous children from families
attempting to inculcate a non-Indigenous work ethic, while sexual abuse was rife and chil-
dren were forced to work (Smith, 2009). Well into the twentieth century, schools subju-
gated children, as shown at the Garden Point Mission (Tiwi Islands) where children
were referred to as “inmates” with the ultimate goal of assimilation into the broader Aus-
tralian community (Sweeney, 1954). In the late 1960s, many Indigenous families in the
Kimberley, Western Australia, had little choice about schooling since the call to send chil-
dren to boarding school came from a station manager or government welfare officer
(Mander, 2012). The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual
Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017a) reported the massive cultural, language,
and social hurdles in students’ transition to boarding schools. The Commission reported
that with minimal staff training, poor resourcing, and no boarding standards, a child
could often be at risk of serious harm (2017a, p. 164).

Despite this history, unlike Canada and the United States, Australian governments have
continued to support boarding schools for Indigenous children. Respected Indigenous
academic, Marcia Langton, supported sending Indigenous students to boarding schools
because parents now have choice in the decision-making process (ABC, 2013). This
“choice” however, does not diminish potential student trauma. Most boarding school stu-
dents will have a trauma-related experience (O’Bryan, 2016). One North Queensland
study showed 26% of Indigenous boarding students had low to moderate psychological
distress, with 70% of students knowing someone who committed suicide in the past
year (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017). O’Bryan highlighted the challenge for boarding
schools is, “trauma-informed models of teaching and learning focus on the two broad
domains: helping students to self-regulate stress responses and impulses; and building
relational capacities” (2016, p. 211).
Boarding schools can support parental choice by supporting student relationships and connection with their home culture. Mander, Cohen, and Pooley’s (2015) research highlighted, “the importance of maintaining connectedness with people and place, language and land, kinship and family, ancestry and spirituality, to the overall wellbeing of Aboriginal boarding students” (p. 33). Students’ need for “connectedness” was also shown in a study of Australian and New Zealand girls’ boarding schools which found that when boarding schools kept culture at the core of their processes, students were empowered and more likely to succeed (Rogers, 2017).

**Culturally safe education**

Culture can be explained through a pedagogical framework where, “there are patterns and processes coming from land and place that impact on the way we do things, the way we think, learn, feel, live and learn” (Yunkaporta, 2009, p. 21). These patterns include connecting through stories, sharing without words, keeping and sharing artefacts, connecting through country-based metaphors, observations before acting, and adding of knowledge for the common good (Yunkaporta, 2009). Cultural safety for Indigenous students allows them to share, express, belong, and feel secure in their cultural identity (Bobongie, 2017), developing their self-concept whilst learning in a distant boarding school (Mander, 2012). A culturally safe boarding student should be able to engage in cultural activities and stay culturally connected to their home (Mander et al., 2015). Culturally safe processes empower students to have their voice heard and develop a strong awareness of their well-being (Benveniste, Guenther, Dawson, & King, 2019). For instance, one study showed parents wanted to culturally connect with their children through technology, or plan cultural activities in school holidays, to balance Western learning during the school term (Mander, 2015). To create a culturally safe environment, boarding school staff are recommended to move beyond “ambivalence” (Mander, 2012, p. 257) so they may be competently trained in culturally responsive processes (Benveniste et al., 2019) and “social and emotional learning” (Heyeres et al., 2019). Further recommendations suggest cultural mentors so boarding school staff may become culturally competent in supporting students to be culturally safe (Mander & Bobongie, 2012).

In very remote communities in the Northern Territory, Australia, it is highly unlikely for a student to access an academic Western secondary education which limits their ability to complete their secondary education “on country” (Wilson, 2014), an Indigenous term for in their cultural environment. Although Wilson’s Review into Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory (Wilson, 2014) suggested a boarding school experience was a practical solution for this issue, it did not describe how Indigenous families could maintain their cultural practices when their children transition to distant boarding schools. Australian Government reviews identified issues with Indigenous student boarding school transitions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017a, 2017b; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017). Concerns raised include student preparation, family engagement, accommodation, student-to-staff ratios, homesickness, cultural safety, wellbeing, and student retention. In response to the “Wilson Review”, the Northern Territory Department of Education established a “Transition Support Unit” using a service delivery model, in which both authors of this article have participated. The Unit supports parental choice to send their children to boarding school (Northern Territory
Department of Education, 2015), yet, as service delivery assumes a one-directional relationship (Barnett, Hall, Berg, & Camarena, 2010), students’ cultural safety may still be compromised despite the good intentions of transition support.

**Partnerships incorporating indigenous culture with Western opportunity**

Community empowerment is essential for partnerships with Indigenous Australians. Some authors have cited the positive effects of symmetrical schooling to community engagement (Duggie & Kotzur, 2014; O’Brien & Rose, 2015) and several Australian examples and models demonstrate how Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities can work together in partnership. For example, Arrernte artist Wenten Rubuntja showed how two cultures can live respectfully side-by-side (Rubuntja & Green, 2002), despite the challenges of racism and discrimination. Mutual cultural respect has been described as “collective vision” (Yunupingu quoted in Mander & Bobongie, 2012, p. 51). Others have portrayed the complex “cultural interface” (Nakata, 2007) or suggested a holistic, co-generated cross-cultural system within a liminal space (Osborne & Guenther, 2013). A butterfly metaphor, for example, illustrated how Indigenous students can learn productively in two diverse worlds where each “world” is represented by a wing (Duggie & Kotzur, 2014) since both worlds need symmetrical balance for flight. In a boarding school setting, the benefits of “walking in two worlds” (Benveniste et al., 2015) has been noted, whilst others have urged the primacy of kinship (Mander & Bobongie, 2012). Others have proposed place-based educational hubs allowing learning within both domains (O’Brien & Rose, 2015), while another model shows how boarding students can have a “both-worlds” opportunity (Drennan & McCord, 2015). These various theoretical, practical, and philosophical frameworks demonstrate what is possible when there is a willingness to work together.

**Theoretical framework**

The research on which this article is based recognises the importance of partnerships as a prerequisite for maintaining cultural safety and student wellbeing (O’Brien & Rose, 2015). Cultural considerations for effective student wellbeing include cultural dreaming, kinship systems, songlines, and a child’s connection and obligations to their home community (Duggie & Kotzur, 2014; Osborne, 2013). Building on these cultural wellbeing needs, this research uses a collaborative “shared space” approach (Cairney et al., 2017) as a basis to understand students’ cultural safety when connecting with a Western boarding school opportunity. This approach describes the “interplay” between the priorities of culture and education (Cairney et al., 2017, p. 2). Central to this “interplay”, the focus is on how a child can remain safe in their culture whilst experiencing a Western educational opportunity.

Drawing on this interplay concept and the “Collaborative Model with Reciprocation” (Barnett et al., 2010, p. 23), the research develops a reciprocal, connective model based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) “ecology of human development” theory. This approach is similar to a framework adopted by Hadwen (2014) in an analysis of challenges faced by boarding school students from rural parts of Western Australia. Figure 1 suggests how
the various layers of Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) “systems” – which he applied to child development – apply to two diverse communities wanting to form a partnership.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) categories are reconceptualised in layered systems influencing students as they navigate relationships from community to college. The “microsystem” describes the closest student relationships at the College and the Community. These include the relationship a student has with their parents (at home) or their house parents (in a boarding school). The “mesosystem” points to supporting relationships between individuals that directly surround the student, for example, in a community the relationship between a teacher and the family, and in a boarding school, for example, the relationship between a houseparent and a teacher. The “exosystem” describes the external influences on a student from their home community governance structures or boarding school management structures. The “macrosystem” corresponds to the influences of traditional Indigenous community values and laws or Western boarding school values and laws, on students. In addition, the “chronosystem” (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) recognises that practices of cultural communities are sustained over time. The arrows in Figure 1 propose mutual exchange or benefit across both communities (Barnett et al., 2010, p. 23). They suggest “both-ways” approaches where “everyone participates” (Ober & Bat, 2007, p. 78) on a learning journey.

Methods

Research focus and positionality

This research is particularly focussed on what practices keep students culturally safe while maximising the opportunities from a boarding school education. This study arose from the primary author’s daily vocation that supports families choosing a boarding school education for their children. This partnership piqued the author’s interest to learn about the apparent dynamic behind students achieving secondary success. This article is based on the combined input of two authors. The first author is a non-Indigenous male educator who has lived in remote Australia for more than 20 years. He recently completed a
Master of Education research case study reporting on a functional partnership between an independent South Australian school and a very remote Indigenous community located within outback Northern Territory, Australia. The second author is a Warumungu, Warlpiri, and Alyawarr leader with extensive cultural knowledge who has been working in state-based cross-cultural education for nine years. He has contributed broad cultural advice to this article, particularly understanding of the necessary elements for a child’s cultural learning journey. Both authors have worked within government roles supporting Indigenous education, as well as supporting Indigenous students to transition to boarding schools within Australia. The first author connects with many remote Indigenous people at a “grass-roots level” and has been accepted within Warlpiri communities after being given the skin name Japaljarri. The second author is positioned as a cultural advisor to this article drawing on his personal experience as an alumni student from a boarding school, as well as his deep cultural insights into a student’s challenge to move from a traditional Indigenous community to a boarding school.

**Research sites, sample, and questions**

A very remote Northern Territory Indigenous community, referred to as “Community”, was chosen as one of the two research sites. The second research site, where students studied at an interstate boarding college community, is referred to as the “College”. Within the Community, 92% of the population of 235 people are Pitjantjatjara speakers. When this research began there was a developing partnership between the Community and College, with six potential students completing Year 12 over a two-year period. Indigenous secondary aged Community students boarded at the College. Non-Indigenous students from the College visited the remote Indigenous community where they learnt about Community culture. The Community is located within a few hundred kilometres from Alice Springs. The College in South Australia is in a regional area in the greater Adelaide region with a small cohort of boarders. Families and school staff resided or worked at either site.

The researched communities are approximately 1800 kilometres apart. Secondary aged children from the Indigenous community boarded at the South Australian school community leaving at the beginning, and returning at the end, of every school term. “Indigenous” here is used to describe Australian First Nations or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, except where a specific language group is referenced. Historically, within the isolated Indigenous community, it was unlikely that students would have engaged in a Western secondary curriculum, completed Year 12, and kept their cultural stories alive. Likewise, prior to this partnership, it would have been unlikely that non-Indigenous students, families and staff from the South Australian community would have had the opportunity to experience the culture and traditions of a traditional Indigenous community.

The College and Community populations formed the basis for the sampling frame (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Eight participants from both sites were chosen through purposive sampling. There were six College participants (three male and three female) and two Community participants (both female). Thought was given to ensure sample balance considering gender, educational background, and employment status, although non-random purposive sampling found this hard to achieve (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) and questioned the reliability of findings. It was difficult to find a comparable number of Community participants.
The same sampling criteria applied at both sites. For the College sample, the principal identified staff participants actively involved in the program for at least one year. For the Community sample, local Indigenous families, or Indigenous school staff who cared for or supervised a Community student for at least one year, were eligible to participate. An “Aboriginal Knowledge and Advisory Group” identified participants addressing these criteria. To acquire Indigenous consent for knowledge transfer, Community Elders were consulted and gave their authority for the research (Gorman & Toombs, 2009). Two Indigenous staff from the Northern Territory Department of Education joined the group. Advisors were asked for cultural direction on research progress to alleviate potential conflicts and biases (Gorman & Toombs, 2009) whilst upholding local Indigenous research methodologies (Denzin, Lincoln, & Tuhiwai Smith, 2008; Ober, 2017).

The research project generally aimed to answer three questions:

1. What is the nature and function of communication practices and modes of communication between two diverse schools?
2. What practices keep students culturally safe while maximising the opportunities from a boarding school education?
3. How does each school community learn from the other, and supports the other in that learning?

This article focuses on the second question.

Research design and ethics

This qualitative case study emphasises the human experience and discovery of the inner workings (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) or phenomenon (Gillies & Cruz, 2014) of an educational partnership. A phenomenological design (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Johnson & Christensen, 2012) allowed for an Indigenous cultural narrative where knowledge is transferred through story (Drennan & McCord, 2015; Gorman & Toombs, 2009). Each participant’s story was recorded allowing the researcher to enquire more freely (Ober, 2017) and to “dig deep” to find the “essence of a phenomenon” (Kafle, 2011). The Aboriginal Knowledge and Advisory Group empowered local Indigenous people to guide the research process. This approach concurs with contemporary research and ethical approaches (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2006; Gorman & Toombs, 2009). The research followed principles of acting honestly with integrity and treating others with respect and courtesy (National Health & Medical Research Council, 2018), following professional procedure recommendations (Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012; National Health & Medical Research Council, 2018). A Charles Darwin University Human Research Ethics Proposal was approved on 10 October 2018, Reference H18080. A Northern Territory Department of Education Application for Conduct Research was approved on 17 September 2018, Reference EDOC2018/76200.

Data gathering, analysis, and limitations

Participants were interviewed individually in English, face-to-face, and using a narrative approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). One Community participant chose to have a
local support person present. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. After transcription, participants were de-identified (Groenewald, 2004) and coded using a NVIVO-12 program to identify themes relating to the research question. Using “interpretative phenomenological analysis” (Willig, 2013, pp. 87–88), a staged approach (text analysis, identifying emerging themes, clustering, and summarising themes) was used. Themes emerged from participant responses to interview questions relating to the purpose, practices, and outcomes of the partnership.

Research limitations include the small sample size potentially having caused theme variation. Purposive sampling may have given extreme responses due to more College participants (6) than Community participants (2). The two Community participants spoke “good” English, although having an interpreter would have allowed a deeper, more informed response since Pitjantjatjara was their first language. When responding in English, meaning may have been compromised because participants may not have chosen the most accurate word or phrase to describe an event (Willig, 2013, p. 95). Researcher bias, related to researcher positionality, in the data coding process (Babbie, 2007) also may have occurred where it was difficult for the researcher to disconnect from his accumulated experience and, thereby, allow participants’ voice to emerge fully (Guenther, Osborne, Arnott, & McRae-Williams, 2017). The potential impact of researcher bias, however, was minimal because interview recordings were listened to several times over several days, and the analysis was checked for accuracy and integrity by the research Advisory Group.

**Findings & discussion**

Research findings represent responses to the question, “What practices keep students culturally safe whilst maximising the opportunities from a boarding school education”?

**Intentional partnership and vision**

The College worked with just one community. This intentional rationale was described by a College participant, noting the importance of kinship relationships:

> It was much better to have [Community] only so that the students are related to one another, they understand each other, there is no infighting that we don’t know about that is cultural, and so the Community is basically exactly that, a Community.

Consequently, Community children were with their peers daily for cultural support. Boys boarded in a freestanding house near the College and girls boarded in a nearby suburban house. This partnership created the environment for deeper relationship development, focussing College resources on a single community, whilst community leaders were able to promote their ideals for bilingual pedagogy. One Community participant reflected, *What we did here... so we came a big partnership. Like sharing ideas. We told them what to teach the kids. Because it [the community school] is a bilingual school... So, we became a partnership.* Another Community participant reflected on reciprocal learning for all students: *It is like a learning each other. Whitefella way and our way... [The College] kids they coming in and learning our ways... our kids go there to [The College] and they learning their way.*
Working with one community allowed for increased staff capacity to contact families and Elders, learn culture, and enable multiple interactions during community visits. This allowed for student-centred focus, allowing for growth in both-ways knowledge (Ober & Bat, 2007). By working with one community, there was a critical mass of students (Mander et al., 2015) developing stronger, deeper, and more culturally understanding relationships (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017b; Drennan & McCord, 2015; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017; O’Bryan, 2016). This “one community” practice meant that the College could ask a Community family member, who knew all the students, to stay with the students if they were was errant behaviour or homesickness:

One Parent came down and spent a number of weeks with us here and supported us in the education of the children … that was an important part of building that trust … We need you to help us with the children and understand their behaviours and maybe to allay some of their homesickness … it helped us in the long term.

**Relationships and cultural respect**

Participant comments centred around strong relationships developing between the College and the Community. The College staff understood that it took time to earn respect as related by this College participant:

The most important thing is having a really clear understanding of the Community and the people and connecting with the families and having that real respect of their culture and then being able to bring it back into the school environment.

College leaders communicated with the Community Elders. One Community participant described an “on country” community meeting where many community members come and met with visiting College staff: … we go to school [and] join together and sit down and look at all the pictures and stories, what they are doing there … videos, pictures, little stories they are doing, little poem, anything. One College participant discussed how male numbers grew in these meetings:

Significantly men would come, men and Elders and grandfathers and fathers which I had not seen initially … it was very much driven by … grandmothers, aunties and female family … we have now seen quite a significant take up by men in the Community to come along to those things [meetings] and support what it is that we are doing.

College staff participants explained how cultural connection and relationship needed to be “right” before students could learn. One College participant emphasised, number one is culture and respect of that culture. Another talked about forgiving their mistakes, keeping the vision, and moving forward. For student travel to and from the boarding school, one Community participant identified the need for a male chaperone to travel with boys and a female chaperone for girls. A College male participant related his journey as a sole male visitor to the Community. He described how another Community visit with his wife removed previously perceived barriers, creating cultural connections as the Community connected with him as a family connects with another family. This “both-ways” understanding (Ober & Bat, 2007) helped to close the cultural gap, connecting the “macrosystems” from each community, thereby allowing for partnership growth.
Empowering non-indigenous students to learn indigenous culture

Student cultural safety was endorsed when non-Indigenous students visited the Indigenous Community. This allowed for Indigenous students to share their cultural story (Yun-kaporta, 2009). One Community participant related this, *They [non-Indigenous students] came on bush trips, all of different types of earth and animals and bush tuckers, we have plenty of bush tucker in our Community and outside. Visiting Indigenous country had positive impact on both staff and students as reflected by a College participant, We just do not need elements of Western society to have a rich and fulfilling life … I am really grateful … I came back a changed person and I know the students did too, so that to me is just incredible.*

The strong engagement of College and Community students on Indigenous country allowed for relationship development, forming links across both macro and microsystems. Whilst there is no evidence that this exchange resulted in Indigenous students feeling culturally safe back at the College, there is evidence that the relationship development allowed for non-Indigenous students learning Indigenous ways. It may be reasonable to assume that this learning experience allowed for greater understanding and empathy from the whole school community if Indigenous students were feeling homesick.

Elders and college staff helping student cultural safety

Two-way cultural respect and communication developed over time with mutually understood processes allowing Elders to culturally engage students. For example, when relatives passed away, Elders phoned students and talked in Pitjantjatjara. One College participant related:

*The Elders are supporting us if we have got any issues that arise … naughty kids or kids that are feeling a bit homesick … to me it’s just a phone call back to the Community … we can sit all the kids down in one room and have them on a loud speaker if there has been a passing up in the Community we will often ring and [Elder] will do a prayer with the kids. She will communicate via a loud speaker in the classroom and that has worked really well.*

This strategy allowed College staff to learn more about cultural traditions. For example, staff learnt more about men’s business and funerals. Funerals posed a challenge for both partners and, in particular, the circumstances allowing students to return home. If students went home frequently, they would “miss out” on Western Education. If they stayed at school, then they risked missing culturally mandated obligations. This quandary was resolved when College leaders met with Community Elders. It was resolved that students would return to community for the passing of immediate family relatives and, if there was contention, Elders would have the final call. These practices aligned with current research showing how cultural safety depends upon boarding school staff culturally respecting a student’s background, family structures, kinship systems, business systems, and obligations to attend ceremonies (Rogers, 2017). This “Elder driven, College accepted” approach enabled both Western opportunity and cultural obligation and showed how, with communication, respect and trust the “macrosystems” and “exosystems” of both communities can exist side-by-side. This minimised fluctuating family obligations and the “internal conflict” that students often experience (O’Bryan, 2016, p. 154).
**Relationship based student management**

College management believed in student relationship development before imposing Western type rules. One participant reflected, *relationship is more important than trying to impose a discipline on to them*. The College was challenged with responding to emotionally or culturally fragile students when they were feeling out of their cultural depth. Most College students could take a “day off” school, but boarding students did not have that option. One College participant described the creation of a “safe space” garden where students could go if they were feeling stressed or vulnerable:

> We want the kids to be safe. So, we would much rather … if they are going to abscond or not be at a lesson either (a) come and talk to us about that first … and tell us how they are feeling about a particular situation or environment … or [b] allow them a place where they can abscond to that we know is safe for them. In a garden area a little bit away from the school … We said if you want have a break where you feel better and just think this through … go to this place, this is your safe place … where you can go while you sort this out in your mind … but always come and talk to us about it.

**Student communication with families**

Participant comment showed College processes when working with student misunderstandings:

> We have learnt this … regular conversations … the students will often ring home … it is really important that they know they can pick up a phone … and we have had a couple of parents make contact back to us via a phone, ‘[Student] is unhappy today … why is she unhappy … this is what was said … a teacher said this …’ … that has been really good. The parents have been great at supporting us … it is the whole Community that supports us which is quite unique.

Both the College and the Community developed clear networks for mutual communication exchange. This demonstrated how the “mesosystems”, direct support systems, contributed to the growth of the partnership.

**Bronfenbrenner’s systems and indigenous Australian cultural safety partnership**

To dig deeper to answer the research question, the child-centred partnership model, shown in Figure 1, was revisited. Central to this model is how the different Bronfenbrenner systems, from the Western and Indigenous worldview, work together in partnership for a child to be culturally safe. Four key recommended directions arise from the findings.

**Governance and partnerships**

Firstly, this research recommends Elders and the College leaders form a joint management committee to set the culture and values for student success in both worlds. A formal structure, or joint “macrosystem” approach, would provide a symmetry and framework for students, staff, and families. Including local interpreters could generate an “in depth” response from Elders, allowing for Indigenous cultural principles to be held equally with boarding school culture. Embodying student voice into meetings (Rogers, 2017) could provide opportunity for their self-determination, cultural identity (Benveniste et al., 2015), and empowerment in both worlds. Alumni students (O’Bryan, 2016) and
transition support services (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2015; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2019) could provide additional direction. The well-intentioned and developing partnership between the College and Community provided a strong basis for development of shared goals that would allow for the development of approaches supporting wellbeing and cultural safety of students. The literature shows there is no single model for doing this well, but the need for safe spaces where Community and College can negotiate what is best for students, is paramount.

**Cultural responsiveness**
Secondly, an innovative framework, represented as a joint “exosystem” approach, could support College staff to be systematically culturally responsive and respond to students’ cultural needs. Ideally, Yunkaporta’s pedagogical framework promotes a clear eight step process that could be used for College teachers and staff to understand Indigenous perspectives (Yunkaporta, 2009). This concept could inspire the Community Elders to promote their artefact use in classrooms, boarding accommodation, and in “safe spaces” like the “safe garden” mentioned earlier. Teachers using learning maps with identified cultural symbols (Yunkaporta, 2009) could help reduce an Indigenous student’s anxiety.

**Cultural brokerage**
Thirdly, a network of cultural brokerage would tie together the numerous individuals into a relationship network, allowing for growth in mutual understanding and respect. Cultural brokerage bridges the gap between cultural safety and Western opportunity. Even though this happened naturally during the community meetings, there is a need for skilled brokers to be able to communicate cultural concepts across the cultural divide so relationships can grow. Frank Bobongie, an Indigenous cultural mentor at a boys’ boarding school in Perth, described how a broker acted between staff and students to help staff understand cultural beliefs whilst helping students change to a new lifestyle (Mander & Bobongie, 2012). Extrapolating this practice, brokers could consult within boarding schools and communities to develop stronger, ontological relationships (Hindle, Hynds, Averill, Meyer, & Faircloth, 2017). This network would connect the “mesosystems” from both communities. Given findings reported the positive experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students learning each other’s cultures and jointly celebrating achievements, it was clear that the students’ “microsystems” grew. This system traditionally contains those people who are closest to the students. When non-Indigenous students became close friends to the Indigenous students, it becomes plausible that both will feel a sense of inclusion and belonging.

**Trauma**
There was no direct participant response about frameworks assisting student trauma or how College staff would respond to a serious incident of student trauma. Implicitly, there was evidence from all participants about how to build the “relational capacities” of the partnership (O’Bryan, 2016, p. 211) and one participant described the creation of a “safe garden” for a traumatised student. During the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017a), the importance of staff training in “trauma informed practice” was emphasised (Commonwealth of
Australia, 2017a), while the educational research journal, Teacher, stated formal training was not necessary within a “wellbeing centred” school (Harris, 2017, p. 1). Teacher identified core elements promoting trust, positive student and family relationships, empathy, student skill development, and organisational connections. Given the College was following these core practices, it appeared to be naturally following trauma informed practices, although psychological distress statistics (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017) suggest College staff should consider formal training.

**Conclusion**

This article showed there were a variety of practices that kept Australian boarding school students culturally safe. Starting with an intentional vision, values centred around the strong cross-cultural respect needed for a partnership to develop. Practices can be summarised as joint governance and management, innovative structures, like a “safe garden”, to support student anxiety, and numerous positive relationships and experiences that grew within the vision. Central to these relationships was an openness that staff, families, and students had to learn about each other. One key element of this partnership was the intentional commitment for both communities to encourage their children to “walk in both worlds”. This meant students kept their cultural identity whilst having a Western educational experience. Elders being culturally available by phone, technology, or in-person, supported students to walk in both worlds. Many active visits from the College to the Community generated ongoing, trusting relationships. This practice allowed Indigenous children to belong in a culturally safe environment, albeit at a great distance from home. The desire for non-Indigenous College students to visit the Community, catalysed relationship development allowing for Indigenous students to know that their non-Indigenous peers cared about them. This deepened the partnership allowing opportunity to be seen both ways.

While not discussed by research participants, the evidence from other research suggests the need for trauma-informed practice. The absence of any discussion on this point suggests that the College may not be prepared for the possibility of diverse traumas and could benefit by considering this in its desire to support cultural safety of its boarding students. For sustained growth, partnership agreements must be driven by local Indigenous people. Agreements should include a positive, strengths-based model where there is a nga-partji, the Pitjantjatjara word for “give-give” (Langton & Ma Rhea, 2009). Etymologically, this relationship could be described as a win-win relationship or Jukurrpa Kutju (Pitjantjatjara phrase for “one story”).

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