The Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children who Attend a ‘Two-way’ Independent Separatist School in Remote Australia: a post-colonial case study

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Abstract

This ethnography analyses the circumstances of Aboriginal children attending a remote Australian school, in this case a private, segregated, two-culture school managed by Aboriginal Elders. Typically, Aboriginal children in segregated schools fail national achievement standards. This thesis examines factors affecting the physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of Aboriginal children at one school. The post-colonial research aims to contribute to debates on ‘closing the gap’ in indigenous disadvantage and advances options for policy makers concerning the future of educational prioritisation of Aboriginal wellbeing.

The researcher spent some months at the School and was immersed with reflexive awareness of epistemological assumptions, positionality, and ethics. The research involved 38 participants who work with about 200 children. The data include observations recorded at the School, interviews with all staff at the School and published research about Aboriginal children.

The findings presented relate to the children’s wellbeing, carefully interpreted from the data. The data show that poor wellbeing affects these children’s capacity to participate in schooling, distracting them and others. Often under-trained, School staff are morally obliged to cater for children’s immediate needs, providing assistance for problems that are usually under control before children first attend school. The School adjusts the syllabus and complements western content with Aboriginal content, employing Aboriginal Elders and Aboriginal men to develop respect for indigenous ethics. The children’s parents and carers are, however, rarely supportive of School activities. Preparedness for formal education enables teachers to focus on the curriculum, modelling skills, behaviour and practices for the children’s future. When children are not ready, and their carers are not supportive, and the school, staff time and energy are drained by emergencies, little time is left for essential long-term education.

The thesis argues that the children need more preparation before starting academic schooling. Programs to prepare both the children and their families can help. Policies that support schools and staff in radical adaptations of programs to better suit the children could include: behavioural practices in western society; emotional self-regulation; self-imagery as independent, important people; adjustment of school
starting and finishing times (to suit the Aboriginal life-style); reduced number of school days per week (to match other NT schools operating on a 3-day fly-in-fly-out model), and developing materials in local languages that help Aboriginal people learn about western health threats and how to manage illnesses.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. This thesis has not been submitted for a degree at this or any other institution.
Acknowledgements

It is the children from the School who lie at the heart of this research and I dedicate the project to each of them. I appreciate the kindness and affection shown during each visit to their community. I must acknowledge the traditional owners of the many language group areas and to members of the Aboriginal School Council who gave permission for me to be on country for this work. I am grateful to the wider School community for the contributions to this study and to the research participants who endured my enquiries with patience and shared their insights with generosity. I acknowledge the trust bestowed in me as the custodian of their stories - I acknowledge their courage and actions, the heartbreak and devastation and the deep wounds in your personal and collective memories.

I wish to acknowledge the ongoing enthusiasm and insightful feedback from Dr Liddy Nevile. Liddy’s support and dedication to this work has been exceptional and extended beyond the usual role of a supervisor. This project would not have been possible without her research mentorship. I would like to express gratitude to Professor Andre Renzaho and Dr Nichole Georgeou. As late-appointed supervisors, their commitment to the project has been unwavering. The exhaustive reviews assisted in the development of this work immensely. I thank them for their encouragement, assistance and support. I would also like to acknowledge the ongoing support of Western Sydney University - I am grateful for being awarded a postgraduate research scholarship and for the significant support provided by the Graduate Research School and the Higher Degree Research team.
With immense gratitude I acknowledge my son Ethan; a powerful force beside me. I thank him for enduring my absences and for tolerating the stressors of living with a mother who has for many years been immersed in scholarly pursuits. My wish for him is that one day he will grow in understanding of his own ability to ‘power on’ - to never give up before the ‘miracle’ happens.

Without the support of my parents Rex and Susan Barrett, none of this would have been possible. I thank them for their ‘live in’ assistance and for the care provided to Ethan. Their encouragement and belief in me as a person and for seeing the value of this work has held me in steadfast determination to complete the project. I wish to express heartfelt gratitude for my siblings, Michael and Ashley, and for their unconditional love, as shown through their consistent support of my projects and passions.

I owe thanks to my fellow doctoral candidates and many friends for their patience, encouragement, and inspiration. Alex Baumann, Kelly Moylan, Corinne Harvey and Gordon Bijen - I am blessed to have been able to share this PhD journey with each of them. To Ellen Trent, Kate Percy, Elizabeth Lhuede, Sally Madgwick, Rachael Corlett, Melanie Fielder and Faye Wilson – I thank them for the meals, honest sharing, and for patiently witnessing this work unfold.
Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABS       Australian Bureau of Statistics  
ACARA     Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority  
ACC       Australian Crime Commission  
ACER      Australian Council for Educational Research  
ACIKE     Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education  
AEDI      Australian Early Development Index  
AEO       Aboriginal Education Officer  
AGPC      Australian Government Productivity Commission  
AHMAC     Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council  
AIFS      Australian Institute for Family Studies  
AIHW      Australian Institute of Health and Welfare  
AISNT     Association of Independent Schools Northern Territory  
AMA       Australian Medical Association  
ARACY     Australian Research Alliance on Children and Youth  
AT        Assistant Teacher  
ATSIC     Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission  
AuSIL     Australian Society for Indigenous Languages  
CASEL     Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning  
CDEP      Community Development Employment Programs  
CDU       Charles Darwin University  
CEO       Chief Executive Officer  
CET       Community Engagement Team  
CFC       Child and Family Centre  
CLC       Central Land Council  
COAG      Council of Australian Governments  
DEET-Cwth Department of Employment, Education and Training
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<td>DET-NSW</td>
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<td>DETYA-Cwth</td>
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<td>DFaHCSIA</td>
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<td>Index of Community Socio- Economic Advantage</td>
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<td>NTCF</td>
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<td>NTCOGSO</td>
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<td>NTIEC</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>QLD</td>
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<td>Remote Area Teacher Education</td>
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<td>Standard Australian English</td>
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<td>SNP</td>
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Glossary

In this thesis, the following terms are used as defined:

indigenous – a person considered to be indigenous to a country

Indigenous – a person considered to be indigenous to Australia

aboriginal – a person considered to be indigenous to a country

Aboriginal – a person considered to be indigenous to Australia

Note that an Australian person is considered Indigenous or Aboriginal if they have self-identified as being of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009).

The school where the research has taken place is not identified but is called the School in this thesis.

This thesis refers to a number of government departments and it is not always easy to tell which are federal and which are state departments. For this reason, abbreviations of departments’ names will indicate which government they are.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis aims to explore a critical view of the wellbeing of Aboriginal children attending a particular remote two-way school from the perspective of those who care for them. It considers the children’s circumstances as an outcome of individual and collective histories, changing policies, legislation and other responses to address their disadvantage, with a focus on wellbeing.

Background

Since 2003, the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) have published biennial ‘Report Cards’ on Indigenous disadvantage. These show a growing interest across Australia in understanding factors contributing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. The reports provide information on the ‘nature of disadvantage’ on a range of indicators measuring wellbeing. The 2016 report showed that Indigenous Australians generally, are becoming more disadvantaged in some areas, with an alarming increase in imprisonment rates, mental health problems and self-harm (SCRGSP, 2016a). A major factor reflecting and contributing to ongoing adult Aboriginal disadvantage are the children’s significantly poor educational standards, particularly of those in remote schools.

Education has long been considered critical to closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage. While young people in Australia are participating in education at higher rates than ever before (ABS, 2016b), Indigenous students continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia, a disadvantage compounded for those living in remote communities (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC-Cwth), 2016). Analysis of the Program for International Student Assessment and the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data suggests Aboriginal students in remote Australia are experiencing stagnation and decline in educational outcomes (Cobbold, 2015). Improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students is regarded as one of the most urgent issues in Australian education (DPMC-Cwth, 2017).

To date the scholarly literature on Aboriginal students in general has largely focussed on the academic ‘curriculum’ of the institutions responsible for their welfare as a strategy to improve performance outcomes. Two major reviews of Aboriginal
Education in the Northern Territory (Collins & Lea, 1999; Wilson, 2014) have shown the importance of including culturally responsive techniques and improved family and community engagement for addressing Aboriginal disadvantage. Research by Sarra (2011) also suggests school-based factors are of primary importance to improving educational outcomes of Indigenous students. Other research has focused on Aboriginal students who have performed comparatively better in NAPLAN tests. Studies such as What Works: Scoping Study into approaches to student wellbeing (Noble, Wyatt, McGrath, Roffey & Rowling, 2008) identified contributing factors underpinning the success of those students, including good school leadership and culturally appropriate pedagogy, consistent with the findings of later research undertaken by Sarra (2011) and Wilson (2014). The premise of these discussions seems to be that focusing on school level factors is the most effective strategy in addressing educational disadvantage, but this overlooks the broader contexts of Aboriginal children’s lives which may be impacting their learning.

**Wellbeing**

Wellbeing has emerged recently as a significant factor in addressing indigenous disadvantage generally, and education outcomes specifically (Noble et al., 2008). Statistics show that Aboriginal people experience greater disadvantage than the wider population on almost all determinants of physical, social and emotional wellbeing (Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council (AHMAC), 2011; ABS, 2015; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2016). There is evidence (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2010, 2012) that improving literacy and numeracy has a flow on effect to other measures of disadvantage; for example, increased educational performance has long term implications for enhanced quality of life, health and overall wellbeing. The Victorian Early Years and Development Framework (2016) recognises children’s wellbeing from birth as both a pre-requisite for and an outcome of learning. That is, a strong sense of wellbeing enables children to engage positively with their environment so they can take full advantage of all learning opportunities that will influence their life chances. The foundations for social and emotional competence and wellbeing are laid well before a child enters formal schooling (Roberts, 2010). This highlights the importance of nurturing wellbeing and social/emotional capacity from the earliest days of a child’s life (Department of Health and Ageing (DHA-Cwth), 2010).
Chapter 1: Introduction

The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report (SCRGSP, 2016) measures the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders but such data alone cannot tell the complete story about the wellbeing of Aboriginal Australians, nor can it tell us why outcomes improve (or do not improve) in different areas. Identifying health outcomes through various indices has enabled insight into some of the disparities, but wellbeing includes, at the very least, cultural, social and physical dimensions, differences in health priorities, and the ways in which being healthy may mean different things to different people. This implies that depending on the priorities of individuals and communities, wellbeing outcomes can differ, and some may be perceived negatively if viewed through the lens of outsiders. Additional limitations of current discussions and research relate to narrow definitions of wellbeing, how aspects of children’s circumstances impact on their wellbeing, and by implication, children’s capacity to successfully participate and engage in school, which is widely understood to have long term implications for socio-economic disadvantage. Often the framework of indicators that aim to measure wellbeing outcomes such as life expectancy, young child mortality and early childhood education (SCRGSP, 2016a) are presented at the aggregate level and do not enable deeper insight into the interactions between children’s circumstances and measures of wellbeing that contribute to their disadvantage. To date, little research has been conducted into these factors as they relate to disadvantaged Aboriginal children, particularly those attending remote two-way schools. The wellbeing of these children, therefore, requires further investigation. The present study intends to address this gap in research.

The research question

The aim of this research is to identify, describe and analyse the circumstances of disadvantaged Aboriginal children who attend the School. This is achieved by adopting a wellbeing framework, enabling the researcher to identify factors that affect the children’s wellbeing, and their capacity to participate in schooling, in a way that respects the interests and desires of the target Aboriginal community. The research aims to contribute further understanding of the lived experiences of Aboriginal children, and to inform the development of new policy approaches.

The research addresses three primary questions:

- How does the two-way school understand the needs of Aboriginal children and adjust its approaches to cater for their needs?
• To what extent do the children’s circumstances impact on their wellbeing and thus their capacity to participate in schooling?

• How can findings and lessons learnt from this case study inform or be integrated into reports and policies such as the Commonwealth Government’s 2016 Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage?

**Researcher’s previous work**

The current research grew out of a Service Learning project undertaken as a component of the researcher’s undergraduate Social Sciences Degree. In 2007, she spent six weeks in Wilcannia, a remote, largely Aboriginal community located in far western New South Wales. While there, she became aware of distinct differences in the way residents viewed their environment. Aboriginal people spoke very fondly of their town, remarked on the friendliness of the people, its physical beauty and cultural significance. At the same time, non-Aboriginal members of the community talked about the high crime rates, unemployment, and low levels of literacy. Wanting to understand why Aboriginal people interpreted their environment in such a positive manner, and given the large population of Aboriginal people, the researcher particularly wanted to understand why Aboriginal children did not engage with the school, and why those who did attend, had very low achievement records.

As part of an Honours project at Western Sydney University, the researcher completed a case study of the teacher and non-teacher related factors that affect the learning outcomes of children at the Wilcannia Central School. She interviewed non-Aboriginal staff to identify their perspectives of the challenges facing Aboriginal students in their learning. The sociological research sought to understand the role of teachers and their ability to affect student achievement. Research findings highlighted the limited capacity of teachers to address the myriad and often complex challenges confronting children beyond the school environment but which impact their learning; prioritising school-level approaches to addressing the children’s academic needs had side-lined the external factors that lead to poor attendance and engagement in school.

There were several limitations to that research as ethical considerations had precluded the researcher from including Aboriginal staff and the Aboriginal students themselves as participants. She chose as subjects of the study, the students’ teachers who were non-Aboriginal. Furthermore, the research was not informed by Aboriginal or even Indigenous or First Nations theoretical perspectives or studies, but rather the research
was grounded in the work of non-Aboriginal, white, western theorists, Mills (2000) and Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1986). Nevertheless, the benefits of the research contributed to a deeper interest in the factors contributing to Aboriginal disadvantage, which is why the decision was made to extend this research for her doctoral studies.

Later, while working with One Laptop per Child Australia as a Program Manager, the researcher visited a number of remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and far western New South Wales. During this time, the researcher first made contact with the school that became the single case study site for the current research (hereinafter referred to as ‘the School’).

In the process of gaining approval from the School to undertake the doctoral research, and in pursuing an ethnographic approach, the researcher had the opportunity to spend time with the children and staff. Initially, she chose to continue to explore non-teacher related factors affecting the learning outcomes of Aboriginal children attending the two-way school, and this formed the initial research proposal. During the consultation process with the community during Visit One, and in the process of gaining ethical clearance for the research, the researcher was supported by the Aboriginal School Council to “tell it like it is”. This was interpreted as support for the research, whatever emerged. In conducting the research, she was presented, however, with the same challenge she had met in her undergraduate research, that is: ethical considerations precluded her from making the Aboriginal students themselves the direct subjects of the research. In an attempt to overcome this limitation, this time the researcher sought permission to centre the voices of Aboriginal people were employed at the School as Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) and Language and Culture teachers. The researcher decided to conduct this research using post-colonial theories, which situate the authority of Aboriginal participants as central to the research. This thesis is a result of that investigation.

Research design

In order to achieve the research aim, the first step was to review literature that documents Aboriginal disadvantage. The researcher critically examined studies, reports and reviews on Aboriginal disadvantage. Later she reviewed the factors and theories of wellbeing in an Indigenous context. The changing approaches to addressing disadvantage over time were documented through a review and evaluation of policy and legislation. The researcher reviewed literature and identified major studies relating to Indigenous education and wellbeing.
In developing the research design, literature related to methodologies for designing ethical and culturally appropriate ethnographic research in an Aboriginal community were reviewed. Such methodologies informed the initial research design and shaped the development of participant-focused research methods.

Three sessions of fieldwork were undertaken during the course of this research. The first focused on building relationships with the School’s community and research participants, through a process of immersion and engagement. In applying an ethnographic approach, the researcher actively participated in school events and routines which included accompanying staff on bus runs and food deliveries into town and bush camps, where many of the School’s children reside. This enabled insight into the children’s living conditions and physical environments in order to formulate a deeper understanding of their circumstances. These insights and observations were recorded in a research journal.

During field Visit Two, interviews were undertaken with staff, many of whom, it emerged, are family and community members. Observations of the children in classrooms were recorded in a research journal. Following the completion of the second field visit, interviews and observational recordings were transcribed and the data analysed. Provisional findings highlighted the importance of several dimensions of wellbeing and the research topic was modified. The Aboriginal School Council was again consulted and approval was granted to modify the focus of the research to a wellbeing perspective. A request to modify the research topic and methodology was submitted to the Western Sydney University Ethics Committee.

A further review of literature with a focus on wellbeing was undertaken and the wellbeing framework as an analytical tool was developed. The third field visit completed the data collection process. Additional interviews were undertaken with Language and Culture teachers and teachers who were newly employed at the school. The researcher recorded new observations and reflections in the research journal, considering the children’s circumstances and their wellbeing.

**The circumstances of some Aboriginal children**

The Aboriginal students who attend the School live in surrounding town and bush camps and are described as some of the most disadvantaged children in Australia (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2017). The School has been included in quantitative research such as the NAPLAN testing. The
results are not specific to the School and as many children cannot read the questions and do not understand them, participation rates are very low.

The significance of this research is the contribution of this thesis to what is known about the circumstances of Aboriginal children, and the challenges faced by those who operate schools that are responsible for the children’s care and education. Cowlishaw (2010a, p. 53) has called for a different way of thinking about Aboriginal conditions in remote communities, and recommended an ethnographic focus on everyday interactions. The hypothesis was that qualitative investigation of the children might yield a different kind of information that will be useful to decision makers.

Previous studies of Aboriginal children have centred on approaches to understanding Aboriginal disadvantage, and at times these have resulted in discussion about the lives of Aboriginal people generally (Hughes, 2008). Aboriginal children have, for example, been described as victims of the ‘gap’, a view that exemplifies a racist interpretation of the circumstances of the children (Kowal, 2008, 2015; Altman, 2009). In contrast, this thesis considers the lives of children in ‘remote conditions’ and focuses on those children specifically, through the views of those who care for them at the School. Their participation in the study contributes an ‘insider’ perspective. The contributions of School staff have been presented in relation to physical, emotional, social and cultural wellbeing, offering a view of the ‘whole person’ and providing insight into invisible and immeasurable conditions not previously documented in terms of wellbeing. In addition, the interviewees’ words have been presented to provide more detail about the circumstances.

**Summary of Thesis**

To answer the research question posed above, this thesis adopts the following structure:

**Chapter 1** has introduced the research topic, the background to the research, and highlighted ‘gaps’ in knowledge regarding the circumstances of children who are positioned as disadvantaged as determined by outcomes on a range of standardised measures. The significance of the research and a summary of the research findings are presented.

**Chapter 2** presents a review of the literature surrounding Aboriginal disadvantage, education and policies towards culturally appropriate models of institutions, including
‘two-way’ schools which provide bilingual education to Aboriginal students in English and the local language with the view to addressing educational disadvantage. A summary of what is currently known about Aboriginal children is provided.

**Chapter 3** introduces the research setting and provides an overview of the research site, school staff and student demographics, school functioning, and the circumstances of the children’s lives focusing on the living situation of many of the children. It explains the research methodology, and details the ethical considerations of working in Indigenous communities with vulnerable populations. It addresses the ethical approvals sought and received from Western Sydney University, and the researcher’s positionality as a white researcher conducting a post-colonial ethnography. The chapter outlines the research tools, and the participant sample. To conclude, the methodological limitations are discussed.

**Chapters 4 to 6** present the data available of the wellbeing of Aboriginal children at the School. Chapter 4 presents the children’s physical wellbeing. Chapter 5 presents the social and emotional wellbeing of students, using detailed descriptions of children’s social networks and support in order to provide insight into aspects of social wellbeing. The children’s emotional circumstances are described, specifically considering how children’s social worlds impact on their emotional wellbeing. Chapter 6 describes the cultural wellbeing of children. All of these chapters discuss the data on the different aspects of children’s circumstances, based on the perceptions of School staff as to the capacity and ability of children to negotiate ‘two-way’ education, their cultural needs, and the challenges inherent in achieving a state of wellbeing.

**Chapter 7** advances options for policy makers concerning the future of educational outcomes that involve the prioritisation of Aboriginal children’s wellbeing. The limitations of the study are discussed. It also presents the thesis conclusion.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced relevant literature and identified gaps in understanding about the circumstances of Aboriginal children. The topic of wellbeing of Aboriginal children attending a remote two-way School was explored, and the thesis question and a thesis structure have been presented. The next chapter extends the review of some of the relevant literature on Aboriginal disadvantage. It then briefly reviews the situation
of Aboriginal people within the Australian state, and finally focuses on approaches to Aboriginal education that have implications for wellbeing outcomes.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction
A substantial amount has been written about the circumstances of Aboriginal children across their social, economic and political dimensions. Recently, the research literature has focused on the underlying causes of disadvantage and the positive factors that contribute to wellbeing. The ninth annual ‘Closing the Gap’ report (DPMC-Cwth, 2017) shows that Aboriginals in remote communities continue to experience disadvantage. This chapter situates the thesis within the specific research literature and wider debates surrounding Aboriginal disadvantage in Australia that are relevant to understanding the lives of Aboriginal children attending a two-way school in remote Australia. Many Aboriginal children attending such remote two-way schools are failing to achieve national benchmark standards in NAPLAN tests (ACARA, 2017).

Not all of the children from Aboriginal camps in the School catchment area attend the School discussed in the thesis, so what is of interest is the research about those who are more disadvantaged, that is, those who generally do not attend mainstream schools and who are thus a similar demographic to those who attend the research School. Currently, the term ‘disadvantage’ is applied to people whose circumstances, as measured against a range of indicators including life expectancy, infant mortality, health and education, are statistically lower than those of the wider Australian population. Many Aboriginals in remote areas fit into this category and are said to be disadvantaged. A number of researchers suggest their disadvantage may have deep underlying causes, such as intergenerational trauma resulting from the ongoing effects of colonisation (Marmot et al., 2008; Garvey, 2008; Atkinson, 2013).

State and national governments have strategies to address the factors causing disadvantage, including for example the Australian Government Productivity Commission’s Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (SCRGSP, 2016a) and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet’s Closing the Gap (DPMC-Cwth, 2017) initiatives. Such initiatives have been developed with little Indigenous involvement; raising concerns about the appropriateness of the methodologies adopted that measure change in ways that assert the cultural paradigm of non-Indigenous Australians (Robbins, 2015). Rowse, (2017, p.1) describes the ‘statistical table’ on Aboriginal
outcomes as colonial knowledge and as “one expression of the settler colonial
capacity and willingness to enumerate colonised peoples as populations…thereby
representing the social in statistical terms”. The Melbourne Declaration on
Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education,
Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008) stated that schools
should play a vital role in promoting the wellbeing of young Australians, and marked
an important shift in reconfiguring frameworks for investigating the circumstances of
Aboriginal people from disadvantage to wellbeing. Nevertheless, mainstream targets
with multiple layers of initiatives continue to dominate policy objectives and
strategies at the expense of cultural sensitivity and community control.

Aboriginal children in remote regions of the Northern Territory are over-represented
among Australians facing disadvantage, yet approaches to understanding their
circumstances through the lens of disadvantage constitute a ‘deficit thinking’ model
(Foley, 1997) that focuses on their inadequacies. There is an urgent need to find ways
to provide a more holistic view of the Aboriginal children’s experience, one which
values the contexts in which they live. A focus on ‘strengths based reporting’ that
incorporates wellbeing, draws on the perspectives of the colonised, and which speaks
to those who have previously been insufficiently consulted and engaged within the
fundamental processes of policy development, may contribute to deepening our
collective understanding of what is needed to ‘close the gap’.

Further discussion of post-colonialism as the theoretical rationale underpinning the
research design of this thesis is presented in Chapter 3.

Closing the Gap

The disadvantage faced by many Aboriginal people is evident in health, incarceration
and education statistics. Since 2003, the Steering Committee for the Review of
Government Service Provision have reported biennially on a range of indicators in
health, employment, and education. Aboriginal people live on average 17 years less
than other Australians (AIHW, 2016) and suffer higher rates of nearly every type of
illness and injury (Kowal, Gunthorpe & Bailie, 2007). In 2012-2013, Indigenous
Australians are four times more likely to be hospitalised for a chronic health condition
in comparison to Australian averages (Australian Medical Association (AMA), 2013;
AIHW, 2016). Other major health concerns are reflected in high rates of suicide and
self-harm. Indigenous Australians are overrepresented in the criminal justice system;
50% of juveniles sentenced to detention are Aboriginal (ABS, 2016c). In the Northern Territory, 97% of youth detainees are Indigenous (Vita, 2015). The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ March 2016 report on Corrective Services show that 28% of the nation’s prison population is Indigenous (ABS, 2016c). This is significant considering the results of the 2016 Census show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples represent 2.8% of the Australian population (ABS, 2017). At the national level, Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child protection system and represent one third of all children in out-of-home care (AIHW, 2017a). Clearly, Aboriginal peoples are experiencing significant socio-economic disadvantage.

For most indicators of disadvantage, outcomes worsen as remoteness increases (SCRGSP, 2016a). This is particularly evident in educational achievement. Aboriginal children attending remote schools continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia (SCRGSP, 2016a). Targeted action in addressing health and social inequalities has increasingly become a priority for state and national Australian governments, typically through the education system.

In 1996, Australian governments collaboratively set targets to ‘close the gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholastic achievement within four years, but little progress was made (Hughes & Hughes, 2013, p.13). On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology from the Parliament of Australia to the Stolen Generation (and Indigenous Australians more generally) for past government policies “which inflicted profound grief suffering and loss on our fellow Australians” (cited in Dockery, 2010, p. 18).

Following his national ‘apology’, Rudd defined goals and targets in consultation with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (COAG, 2009) was established by COAG in response to the Social Justice report (Calma, 2005) to frame the task of ‘Closing the Gap’ in Indigenous disadvantage in Australia. The agreement entitled Closing the Gap, commits all Australian governments to achieving six agreed targets:

- close the life expectancy gap within a generation (by 2031);
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade (by 2018);
- ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years;
• halve the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade;

• at least halve the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020, and

• halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by 2018.

Since 2008, the Australian Government and the states and territories have together committed an additional $4.6 billion under Closing the Gap (House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, 2011). According to the 2012 Indigenous Expenditure report, total direct indigenous expenditure was estimated to be $25.4 billion (Banks, 2012). Barbour found that in relation to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage, substantial government investments have “yielded dismally poor returns to date” (2011, p. 4). Barbour (2011, p.3) quotes the Australian Government Department of Finance and Regulation which declared:

Past approaches to remedying Indigenous disadvantage have clearly failed, and new approaches are needed for the future.

The 2017 Closing the Gap Report shows that across the eight NAPLAN areas (reading and numeracy for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9), the proportion of Indigenous students achieving national minimum standards is on track in only one area (Year 9 numeracy) (DPMC-Cwth, 2017, p.40). Literacy rates for very remote students in Year 9 are about 10% (DPMC-Cwth, 2017, p.40). The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational outcomes is greatest in very remote locations (SCRGSP, 2016a). Almost all young people living in very remote locations in Australia are Indigenous (ABS, 2016a). Senior secondary education, in particular, is generally economically unsustainable in most remote and very remote settings (Wilson, 2014). Reducing the national gap in schooling participation, outcomes and completion rates will therefore require a concentrated effort in very remote locations (ABS, 2016b). Meanwhile, these Closing the Gap statistics provide stark evidence of sustained disadvantage in remote Aboriginal communities.

Recent performance indicators for the third Closing the Gap target indicate that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in and attending a preschool program, where it is possible to measure, is 87 % (DPMC-Cwth, 2017). The baseline data for this new target is from 2015. The target to halve the gap in reading and numeracy for Indigenous students by 2018 is not on track, and the fifth
target was missed when indigenous students who ‘completed’ year 12 could not meet Year 5 national standards (DPMC-Cwth, 2017, p. 44). According to the recent Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report, the sixth Closing the Gap target – to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade – will be “directly influenced” by education outcomes (SCRGSP, 2016a).

A significant body of research has pointed to the strong correlation between education, income and health (van Krieken, Smith, Habibis, McDonald, Haralambos & Holborn, 2000). The OECD (as cited in Gray, 2008, p. 201) considers students who fail in education are “at serious risk of not achieving at levels sufficient to participate in the 21st century workforce and contribute as productive citizens”. People with lower levels of education are more likely to be unemployed and less able to contribute to their own wellbeing, or to that of their society. It is important to note that there is little to no employment among remote Aboriginal communities. For Aboriginal children living in remote communities and suffering disadvantage, the employment figures are therefore not relevant as the growth in employment of Aboriginal people Australia-wide is most likely to occur among those who can attend mainstream schools, and not those who are in many cases, ‘rescued’ by attending Schools such as the School in this study. The formal recognition that schools have a broad role to play in the lives of young people, beyond scholastic achievement, was identified in the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008).

**Remote separatist schools**

The Northern Territory has unique educational challenges—there are 985 indigenous communities in the NT with a total of 185 schools (151 public and 32 private), and 75% of the Northern Territory’s Indigenous students live in remote communities. Clearly there are challenges in developing policy that can be effectively implemented to support this diversely located student population.

Today, the NT is the only jurisdiction in Australia where students perform worse in mathematics and science than they did 20 years ago (Thomson, 2016). The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (2016) released results from the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Thomson, Wernert, O’Grady & Rodrigues, 2016) which provided evidence that Aboriginal children are performing worse than they did in 1995, and poor results are concentrated for children
attending bilingual schools, many of which are located in the NT. The performance of bilingual schools in NAPLAN assessments now suggests that bilingual education, at least as practiced, is not working (Hughes & Hughes, 2012).

In 2013, Ted Egan, a one-time Administrator of the Northern Territory (2003-2007), said that he had:

[never been more despondent about the prospects for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. Despite the existence of Indigenous schools with separate curricula, ‘pretend’ bilingualism and Homeland Learning centers have resulted in generations who can’t read and write (as cited in Hughes & Hughes, 2013).

Hughes & Hughes (2013) have outlined common misconceptions about what is contributing to Aboriginal children’s poor competency scores. According to Hughes & Hughes (2013), the causes of educational failure are not because of:

- Indigeneity — the majority of Indigenous students, Australia-wide, pass NAPLAN;
- Remoteness — there are many instances of remote locations that have both high performing mainstream schools and an underperforming Indigenous school;
- School funding — some schools with the highest student funding have the lowest performance on national standards outcomes, and vice versa;
- Size of school — many non-indigenous small schools have excellent results.

In their Indigenous Education Report, Hughes & Hughes (2012) attribute poor performance to ‘separatist’ education (social experiments), bilingual education, Indigenous-specific education programs and welfare dependence. In their findings, Hughes & Hughes (2012) ignore the structural determinants of educational disadvantage including the ‘rules of NAPLAN’ which sideline the broader context of children’s lives. The findings of research undertaken by Hughes and Hughes (2012) were again reiterated in 2013 (Hughes & Hughes, 2013) and upon analysis are shown to be inconsistent with recent educational performance indicators (ACARA, 2017).

The findings fail to provide sufficient explanation for the persistent poor educational outcomes of Aboriginal children attending schools in remote regions of the Northern Territory.

According to McMahon (as cited in Salleh, 2017), the outcomes for bilingual schools are due to the lack of resources and government requirements for English teaching—
where once there were 30 bilingual programs in the NT there are now just nine. Further, there has been no significant commitment to restore lost funding. Despite the conflicting views about the factors causing educational disadvantage, it is evident that current strategies of detecting inequality and monitoring it are not advancing outcomes on a range of indicators.

**Approaches to addressing disadvantage**

**Social inclusion**

Approaches to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage have centred on the importance of social inclusion, specifically in the context of education. Policy development from the early 1970s was increasingly informed by literature that emphasised social inclusion for overcoming concentrations of disadvantage in Aboriginal populations (Robbins, 2015). The rhetoric of ‘social inclusion’ was informed by government commissioned research that broadly aimed to determine effective strategies to increase Aboriginals’ ‘social participation’. The capacity for Aboriginal people to determine the extent of their ‘participation’ in the dominant cultural mainstream was, however, shaped by various initiatives and legislation in the context of education that are mostly inconsistent with self-determination (see Appendix 2).

Research studies commissioned by State and National governments emphasise social inclusion, with the aim of ensuring Aboriginal children have opportunities to access culturally relevant education. Research undertaken by Kerr (1992), commissioned by the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, emphasised the importance of competency in both English and Indigenous languages. The investigation extended beyond the children’s immediate educational needs, and pointed to the living conditions describing Aboriginal communities as “worse than a third world country ravaged by war” (Kerr, 1992). Attention to the broader context of children’s lived experiences highlighted the need to enhance children’s social capital through further engagement of their family and community in schools, with a view to collaborative development of education policy. The National Aboriginal Education Policy (1989-2004) promoted the inclusion of Aboriginal families and communities in decision-making to promote equity of educational access, participation and outcomes. It was acknowledged that while Aboriginal people were maintaining connections to traditional culture, Aboriginal children were failing to develop the skills and
competencies necessary for successful participation in schooling, essential for pro-
social and responsible lifestyles (Kerr, 1992).

The National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
(Yunupingu, 1994) addressed the need for greater access to, and participation in,
education for Aboriginal children. The author, a prominent Aboriginal community
leader, outlined ways in which education might be more culturally responsive to the
concerns of Indigenous people, and argued for the value of both-ways education.
Study participants highlighted the need for greater inclusion in education, including
curriculum design and development. A converging message from many areas
including the bilingual education movement (Lo Bianco, 1999; Rossel & Baker, 1996)
further emphasised the value of both-ways education for educators and parents. The
implications of the review led to a focus on school-level factors, evident in various
government initiatives that aimed to help teachers support poorly performing
Aboriginal students, including for example the program ‘Bridging the Gap’. Ideally,
engagement in this program expands teachers’ literacy skills to recognise and support
the social and cultural needs of Indigenous children and their families (Department of

The Review led to the National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Peoples 1996–2002 and in 1997, all State, Territory and
Commonwealth Education Ministers agreed on a national goal which stated that every
child leaving primary school should be numerate and able to read, write and spell at
an appropriate level (MCEETYA, 1996; Masters & Forster, 1997). Clearly, there
were conflicting priorities and challenges associated with balancing the concerns of
Aboriginal community members who voiced the need for culturally appropriate
education while simultaneously ensuring Aboriginal children would adequately
advance in their western education, thereby ensuring the same opportunities would be
available in the longer term as those enjoyed by other Australians. There was an
assumption that equal education opportunities would mean equal outcomes. There
was also a dogged determination to evaluate the problem through a narrow lens of
western literacy and numeracy highlighting the persistent prioritisation of dominant
cultural values and competencies reflective of a colonialist agenda.

1 ‘The Dare to Lead’ program is another example (Matthews, Howard & Perry, 2003).
Curricula, standards and teachers

In 2010, the Commonwealth government launched the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. The National Policy formed the basis for cooperation and collaboration between educational institutions, states and territories, and the Commonwealth, in association with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Perso, 2012). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), 2010) further emphasised a united approach to educational disadvantage and its aims were to hasten the rate of improvement in educational outcomes so that Aboriginal children would receive “a high quality, world standard education to equip them for life in the 21st century”. While it is commonly assumed this means world standard literacy and numeracy scores, it is more likely it means more about using the ‘institutionalisation’ of children as a context in which to engage with their disadvantage, where it exists.

According to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (DfAhCSIA-Cwth) (2012), disadvantage and the need to cater for a litany of issues that impede the ‘closing of the gap’ can prompt schools to take advantage of the opportunity to liberally localise the National Curriculum, meaning they can modify the syllabus content, for their students. Realising that Australia’s performance in key areas of learning was declining in comparison to other countries (Le, Miller, Slutzke & Martin, 2011) the authors of Australia’s National Curriculum required a transition from an outcomes-based curriculum design to a prescriptive, skills-based curriculum design (ACARA, 2011a). Significantly, the authors of the National Curriculum placed emphasis on the need for individual schools to implement ‘localised’ content. Introducing the English component, Professor Peter Freebody stated that teachers should “adapt what this curriculum holds for them into the real conditions in which they work and that this would have equity implications across the country” (ACARA, 2011b).

The National Curriculum recognises that learning to read is best done with materials written in the learner’s first language (ACARA, 2011a) and current linguistic theories suggest that learning new languages is promoted by singing in the new language, and practising the new sounds (James & Pearn, 2011). Yet there has been reluctance, historically, to recognise that Aboriginal English, like any language, has its own
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grammars and idioms, and that the various dialects of Aboriginal English are linked to particular regions around Australia (Masters, 2011; Mason & Matas, 2015). Malcolm, Konigsberg, Collard, Hill, Grote, Sharifan, Kickett & Shaanna (2002, p. 107) argue that Aboriginal English is the only form of language used by Aboriginal people Australia-wide within Aboriginal contexts, to express Aboriginal meanings.

Emphasis has thus been placed on the delivery of culturally appropriate education (Hughes & Hughes, 2012). Respect for language and culture is a priority in the [National] Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages (ACARA, 2013). It is based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s unique sense of identity and has been developed as a tool for embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the Australian curriculum. This sense of identity is approached through the interconnected concepts of country/place, people and culture. Embracing these elements enhances all areas of the curriculum and is referred to as ‘Culturally Responsive Schooling’ (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; ACARA, 2013). In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, this is intrinsic to traditional living and learning and a holistic world-view.

The research on Culturally Responsive Schooling is significant and continues to grow (Eckermann, 1987; Collins, 1993; Craven, 1999; Frigo, 1999; Gay, 2002; Klump & McNeir 2005; Bazron, Osher & Fleischman, 2005; Brayboy & Castagno, 2008; Yunkaporta, 2009). It draws on other research on multicultural education, cultural difference and diversity, culturally relevant education, ‘closing the gap’, and cultural competence in schooling and in other service provision (Perso, 2012).

Despite many teachers’ best intentions and commitment, scholars argue that most teachers have inadequate understanding of appropriate pedagogies and the complexities of Indigenous cultures, knowledge and identities (Craven, 1998; Jones, Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Malin & Maidment, 2003; Partington & Beresford, 2003; Villegas, Neugebauer, Venegas & Kerry, 2008). Aboriginal children learn best and most efficiently when taught by a culturally aware teacher, preferably an Aboriginal teacher (Rigney, 2010). Wemyss (2003) advocated the inclusion of Elders to teach culture at schools, especially to enhance the ‘celebration’ of children’s identity and cultural experiences in the school setting (Sarra, 2011a). Suitable Aboriginal teachers bring a wider range of cultural perspectives into schools and may assist in developing networks with the Aboriginal communities around the school, which is a valuable component of culturally responsive schooling. Indigenous teachers can also play an
important role as teacher educators and as mentors to non-Indigenous teachers and preservice teachers (Santoro, Reid, Crawford & Simpson, 2011).

There has been a lack of consensus on what constitutes indigenous knowledge and some of the literature is devoted to coming to an agreement on exactly what constitutes indigenous perspectives. Nakata (2007) argued that within the broader discipline of indigenous studies, rigorous debates about what counts as indigenous knowledge, indigenous perspectives or indigenous studies are occurring around the world (as cited in McLaughlin & Watman, 2007).

Anita Heiss argues that Aboriginal people should be free to choose how they represent their heritage (2012), while Smith (2005, p.86) following Fanon, Sartre & Farrington (1963) and Memmi (1967), has noted that within the western academy, indigenous knowledge is conceptualised as ‘other’, while ‘othering’ refers to the projection of assumed cultural characteristics, ‘differences’, or identities, onto members of particular groups. Such projecting is not based on actual identities, but on stereotype identities. Some indigenous people have been so heavily socialised by the deficit colonial gaze that they have come to accept negative stereotypes as part of their identity (Gorringe, Ross & Forde, 2011; Sarra 2005). In the educational context, Sarra (2005) identified how a negative sense of identity among Aboriginal children and their families fuels low expectations of both self and others, preventing educational engagement and achievement. In being the ‘other’, it constitutes indigenous identities as ‘colonised’ as much as it constitutes ‘westerners’ as ‘the colonisers’ however indigenous identity, and thus knowledge, exists outside, as well as within, the coloniser/colonised cultural interface (Nakata, 1992; McLaughlin & Watman, 2007).

The ‘What Works’ team from National Curriculum Services undertook research in eleven remote schools to identify the strategies, practices and behaviours of each of these schools, research that has resulted in improved outcomes in standardised assessments (National Curriculum Services, 2012). Strong school leadership, quality teaching and workforce development, adopting a ‘high expectations culture’, and engaging with parents and others in the local community work well for each of these schools (National Curriculum Services, 2012). Noticeably these strategies are not just about teaching in classrooms and inevitably, if implemented, they change the school and home environments of the children. The researchers argued that much of what has been achieved in the eleven schools is transferable to other locations, but on review of
the ‘improvement map’ presented in the report the transferability of this framework is questionable.

Despite consistent efforts to address Aboriginal disadvantage and to support Aboriginal children’s wellbeing through a number of strategies, disadvantage persists. Further efforts to identify determinants of wellbeing have been the priority of many researchers to develop understandings of why disadvantage persists for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

**Australia’s Colonial History: The Policy Context**

This section presents an overview of policies and strategies implemented since Federation, with the aim of highlighting the rapidly changing responses to Aboriginals. Since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 in Botany Bay, government policy relating to Aboriginal people has been designed and implemented by non-Aboriginal people (Heiss, 2013). As outlined in Appendix 2, there have been policies of protection, assimilation, self-determination and reconciliation. According to Heiss (2013) “none of these policies have actually made the condition of Australia’s Aboriginal people any better than it was prior to colonisation”.

Post-colonial theorist Edward Said (1993) argued many years ago that issues of disadvantage, injustice and suffering must always be amply situated in history, culture and socio-economic reality, so the circumstances of Aboriginal children cannot be understood or adequately addressed unless they are viewed from a broad perspective that includes an analysis of both historical and present day issues, highlighting the colonial history of Australia and the enduringness of colonisation for Aboriginal people.

**Protection and assimilation**

Since the early colonial period, state and national governments have introduced policies that reflect an extraordinary level of control of Aboriginal people’s lives. The Commonwealth assumed responsibility for governing the Northern Territory in 1911, replacing the colony of South Australia which had annexed the Northern Territory in 1863. The Commonwealth’s Aboriginal Ordinance 1918 combined and replaced the NT Aboriginal Ordinance Act of 1910 for the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal population, estimated at 50,000 (ABS, 1912). The Federal Government had the role of Chief Protector and was the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and ‘half-caste’ child to the age of 18 years in the Territory (Wilkie, 1997). This was portrayed as a
‘civilising mission’ with covert attempts to eradicate culture and ‘breed out colour’ (McGregor, 2011). In Central Australia, large areas were classified as Aboriginal reserves, and missions were established on these reserves and government properties to ensure the ‘protection’ of Aboriginal people from racial violence. Missionaries and native welfare officers implemented post-war assimilation policies with the overarching aim of assimilating Aboriginal people into Australian society. In effect, the missions resulted in the intensification of racial segregation in housing and education.

Early in the 20th century, Australian state governments used school education as an assimilationist strategy for integrating half-caste Aborigines into mainstream society. Participation was governed by racial segregation within mainstream schools and attendance was permitted only if children abided by the “clean, clad and courteous” regulation (Gray, 2008).

Anthropologist A. P. Elkin (as cited in Gray, 2008, p. 66) wrote in the 1930s:

- The present policy is to educate aborigines (mostly mixed-bloods) up to what might be called a ‘useful labourer’s standard’, for to do more, if it were possible, would not help them. ... aborigines should not, and cannot, be assimilated by the white community. They must live apart. ... They cannot become equals of the white race.

The contributions of anthropological researchers in the early 20th century claimed to be objectively describing the characteristics of racial groups, but already they were convinced that the black races were inferior (Cowlishaw, 2013). Later critiques of ethnographies produced by ‘positivist Aboriginalists’ indicated that they had shown little appreciation of the historical, political, or economic forces that had created the communities that were being studied. The accounts of anthropologists such as Elkin (1933) were later described as an ‘ideological service in the cause of imperialism’ (Cowlishaw, 2013), for informing policy development during the protectionist and assimilationist eras.

In 1937, the first Commonwealth/State conference on ‘native welfare’ formally adopted assimilation, already evident in state policies, as a national policy. The presumption was that Indigenous Australians could enjoy the same standard of living as white Australians if they adopted European customs and beliefs and were absorbed into white society (Behrendt, 2016). Assimilation policies endorsed restrictive and punitive legislation such as the forced removal of Aboriginal children. The Chief Protector proposed a solution to eradicate the ‘half-caste problem’ by ensuring that by
the fifth and sixth generations, all native characteristics of Australian Aborigines would be eradicated (Rowley, 1978). The implementation of assimilation policy allowed ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to be forcibly removed and placed in European institutions, including Christian missions (McGregor, 2011; Behrendt, 2016).

Until the 1950s, government policy denied Aboriginal people access to all but minimal education. While the policy aimed broadly for eventual and complete assimilation, the white community requested the exclusion of Aboriginal children from public schools. As a result, government funded Aboriginal schools were established. The syllabus in these schools emphasised manual labour, especially domestic service, with the goal of eradicating Aboriginality (Cadzow, 2007). In addition, education was used to suppress language, culture, and promote assimilation (Munro, 2005). The majority of children who were removed were discouraged from having any contact with their family and community members, and were often refused access if they requested contact. It was believed the primitive Aboriginal was incapable of taking care of her own child (Holland, 2013). According to Behrendt (2016, p.76) “these stereotypes legitimised the existence of the government’s regulations and policies”. In missions and foster homes, Aboriginal children were taught to deny their heritage, because Aboriginals were considered to be sub-human and disgusting (Broome, 2003). Some Aboriginal families started to disguise their identity (Morgan, 1987).

Until the mid-20th Century, and prior to Aboriginal people being recognised as equal citizens and thus included in the census, information regarding their circumstances and the extent of Aboriginal disadvantage was not widely recognised or understood. The developing global human rights regime and the suffering of colonised indigenous peoples worldwide were recognised in a formal report entitled The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) in 1953 that specifically reflected the rights of aboriginal people to freedom of cultural expression (Harris & Devlin, 1997). In 1960, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention against Discrimination in Education which came into effect in 1962. This gave legitimacy and support to the struggles of Aboriginal people in Australia within a broader process of global decolonisation. Aboriginal people in Australia fought for recognition of their right to
full citizenship, and to ‘spotlight’ the extent of their suffering since the early colonial period.

The disadvantage confronting Aboriginal people was grounded in notions of human rights, and the quest for equal citizenship and policy changes that followed were an attempt to address past violations of human rights. Aboriginal rights claims were recognised in the struggle to gain control over their land and to protect and maintain their cultures (Tully, 2000). Following the 1967 referendum, a significant change in policy direction occurred as the Commonwealth assumed the power to make laws for the benefit of Aboriginal people, and since that time, Australian governments have arguably tried to identify, critically evaluate, and develop and implement policies which address the perceived needs of Aboriginal people to achieve specific policy outcomes. At the same time the effects of destructive colonial policies on Aboriginal people such as the removal of Aboriginal children were not responded to until much later.

The Bringing Them Home Report\(^2\) declares that nationally, between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970 (Wilkie, 1997). Not all children were removed by the ‘Aboriginal Protection Board’ which was established for the purpose of overseeing the mass deportation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from reserves and putting them into institutions (McGregor, 2011), but most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were affected in some way. For example, many Aboriginal children were forced into hiding so that they would not be removed from their families by ‘welfare’ officers. Despite work by prominent Australian historians (for example Goodall, 1995, 2002; Cadzow, 2016) which have contributed deeper understandings of the legacy of colonialism and the impacts of past policy on the current welfare of Aboriginal people broadly, the processes of colonisation have created stereotype identities of Aboriginal people, who continue to be positioned as ‘other’ if they do not ‘adequately’ integrate into the dominant cultural mainstream.

\(^2\) Full title: Bringing them home: Report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 1997).
There are conflicting views regarding the effects of European colonial occupation and specifically the impact of past policies and legislation on Aboriginal people. The *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry sought to expose the experience of people removed from their families, but witnesses were placed at risk of further trauma as they testified. An important point to highlight is the harm caused to participants as ethical guidelines were compromised. The impacts were recorded as evidence, but some claim that the events described were exaggerated or minimised and there was an overall failure to ‘prove the evidence’ (Brunton, 1998; Herron, 2000; Host & Milroy, 2001)

Historians have recognised the constructed and contested nature of histories… that are not a set of stable facts, but are instead processes of mobilising narratives” (Goodall, 2002, p.12).

The two major themes of invasion violence and the stealing of children have now been widely understood as part of the public discourse increasingly associated with the process of Reconciliation (Goodall, 2002).

The *Bringing Them Home* report (HREOC, 1997) marked a pivotal moment in the controversy surrounding the Stolen Generations. Formal apologies were delivered from each state over the course of the following year, 1998, and finally by the Rudd government on behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia in February 2008.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now Human Rights Australia) similarly recommended that self-determination be implemented as an overarching policy to address past policy failures that resulted in cultural loss and deep trauma for many Aboriginal people (Wilkie, 1997). The ongoing and cumulative effects of colonisation were later recognised as determinants of disadvantage.

**Self-determination - a new government approach**

The early 1970s saw the emergence of the concept of self-determination or self-management in Aboriginal affairs, recognising their right to autonomy in all areas of life. Self-determination was a policy movement aiming to reduce conditions of oppression and to provide Aboriginal people an ‘ongoing process of choice’ (Iorns, 1992, p.271), essential for ensuring they are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs. Self-determination was seen to be the only way to improve living standards and socio-economic conditions of Aboriginals, but the lack of long-term historical data on these made it difficult to track the evolution of Indigenous disadvantage (Kapuscinski, 2013) or to understand the deeper conditions causing
disadvantage. The assumption underpinning the policy shift was that Aboriginal leaders were the experts on their circumstances and best understood the needs of their people. Past exclusion of Aboriginal people in the decision-making processes that would affect their lives was increasingly recognised as a contributing factor for past policy failures.

In terms of official policy and following Australia’s ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1980, the Federal Labour Government of 1983-1996 supported the self-determination approach for all Australians. The right to self-determination had particular application for Aboriginal people as for the first time there was formal Australian recognition of their civil and political rights, particularly in their right to further enhance ‘traditional’ continuity. The ICCPR addresses issues of open and accountable government and ‘ensuring consultation with and appropriate participation in decision making for people affected by government decisions’.³

Self-determination embraced collectivistic responses to issues causing Aboriginal disadvantage. It was acceptable to government provided it did not equate to political separatism. Gradually self-determination emerged as the philosophy underpinning indigenous policy in the 1970s and 1980s. Increased recognition of the importance of culture for Aboriginal people and the failure of past policy that had sought cultural eradication continued to shape policy development and direction. Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) were introduced to promote economic participation and to assist Aboriginal people in developing skills and competencies needed to successfully participate in the dominant economy. Later, definitions of self-determination embodied the right of indigenous people to choose and pursue their desired balance between cultural maintenance and engagement with the mainstream economy (Dockery, 2010).

Under the self-determination rationale, representative Aboriginal bodies were established. Proponents of self-determination argue that “Australian legal and administrative structures should accommodate Indigenous forms of social life” (Kowal, 2008, p. 339). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

³ Article 25 (a) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states every individual has the right and opportunity “to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives” (UN General Assembly, 1966).
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(ATSIC) was the Australian Government body (1990-2004) through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were formally involved in the top-down processes of government affecting their lives. Perhaps for the first time, Aboriginal people were given autonomy to exercise a measure of self-determination.

A review of ATSIC was commissioned by the Federal Government in 2003. *In the Hands of the Regions: A new ATSIC* (Collins, Hannaford, Huggins & Collins, 2003) investigated the extent to which Aboriginal people had been formally involved in Government processes. The review concluded that ATSIC was not serving Indigenous people well (Hannaford et al., 2003). Following the release of the review, the Howard Government began to remove some of ATSIC’s fiscal powers and in 2004 ATSIC was abolished following corruption allegations and litigation. This government action was seen by many commentators as harmful to Aboriginal people in Australia (Ackerman, 2009). The design of the review challenged the place of elected representative indigenous bodies in the Australian political system. The Liberal National coalition Howard Government did not accept the review committee’s recommendation to replace ATSIC with a different organisation to deliver better services that were self-determined by Aboriginal people.

The post-ATSIC future of Indigenous affairs resulted in a shift towards mainstream service delivery with serious implications. Prime Minister John Howard rejected the self-determination approach as ‘symbolic reconciliation’, arguing that economic development was the key to success in Indigenous Affairs, an approach it termed ‘practical reconciliation’ (Altman, 2007a, p. 308). This view has since been consistently presented as the way forward in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage, especially by prominent Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, who attributes current Indigenous inequality to welfare dependence and the failure of Aboriginal people to effectively participate in the dominant economy (Pearson, 2009).

Moreton-Robinson (2009, p.69) has commented on Pearson’s ‘discourse’ of pathology arguing that indigenisation of welfare dependency masks the strategies of patriarchal white sovereignty. Clearly, conflicting discourses and competing interpretations of Aboriginal disadvantage are evident within the research community, and are embedded broadly in a larger set of concerns regarding the direction for future policy developments.
Separatism in education
Self-determination saw the rise of separatist institutions such as independent bilingual schools that could exist on the margins of the dominant cultural mainstream. Separatist institutions advocate cultural, ethnic, tribal, religious or racial separation from the larger group. Globally, the ‘separatist’ bloc has sought freedom from perceived colonial oppression; for some, separatist schools provide a way to exist on the margins and say “No” to the oppressors (hooks, 2000). The impetus for bilingualism was connected to a global movement that saw increasing implementation of traditional language programs internationally to support colonised people in their educational pursuits (Atkinson, 2014).

The first major review of education in the Northern Territory was commissioned by the Federal Government in 1964. An Investigation into the Curriculum and Teaching Methods used in Aboriginal Schools in the Northern Territory (Watts & Gallacher, 1964) was a response to the lack of success experienced by Aboriginal children within western education systems, evident in poor attendance. The Watts & Gallacher (1964) report publicised findings of the investigation that included forty-four case study sites; thirteen of which were bilingual schools. The study found that many children in mainstream schools struggled with schooling delivered in English, although the authors argued that extending bilingual programs would not be viable. In their view, white teachers could not really be expected to learn Aboriginal languages, there were too many languages, and preparing textbooks in all of the languages was not feasible (Buschenhofen, 2010). The main recommendation was “the language of instruction throughout the entire school programme remains English” (Watts & Gallacher, 1964, p. 59). The authors concluded that a better and more appropriate Teaching English as a Second Language methodology was needed, not bilingual education.

According to Buschenhofen (2010), the objective of the 1964 study reflected the general (non-Aboriginal) attitude of a government policy of assimilation "… to promote the advancement of the people towards life in and with the rest of the Australian community and on exactly the same conditions as those enjoyed by all other Australians" (Watts & Gallacher, 1964, p. 33). Assimilationist agendas were framed in notions of social inclusion. The authors did not recognise the diversity of the communities included as case study sites in data collection and analysis processes. Failing to acknowledge cultural diversity reinforced notions of homogeneity of indigenous people and, in particular, Aboriginal children’s needs. This is significant
considering the widespread implications of the study’s conclusions. The study did, however, recognise socio-economic barriers as a major factor affecting school attendance. In response, the Federal Government introduced the Aboriginal study grants scheme in 1969, providing financial assistance to Aboriginal students struggling to complete their schooling due to financial problems. This policy decision marked the beginning of formal recognition that underlying socio-economic factors were contributing to Aboriginal disadvantage.

Bilingual education was formally adopted in the Northern Territory in 1972 to improve the mastery of English as a Second Language (ESL) (Harris & Devlin, 1997). The rapid advances in education policy were fuelled by increasing recognition of the importance of traditional language in delivering culturally appropriate schooling that would ultimately redress past policy failures that denied Aboriginal children opportunities to learn in their first language.

The changing policy approach - from bilingualism to two-way

In 1998, the ruling Country Liberal Party in the Northern Territory, made a decision to “progressively withdraw the Bilingual Education Program, allowing schools to share in the savings and better resource the English language programs” (Devlin, 2011). The new focus was on further development of ESL programs which resulted in a general lack of funding for bilingual programs. This meant many schools could no longer fund Indigenous positions and there was a decline in the number of Indigenous schools (Devlin, 2011). The NT government then commissioned The Learning Lessons Review (Collins & Lea, 1999) as a result of community backlash following government threats to terminate bilingual programs. In-depth case studies of schools across the Northern Territory explored parental concerns and issues to do with educational effectiveness. The authors of what became known as the ‘Collins Review’ identified a need for strong ESL support for Aboriginal students and discussed reasons for supporting the continued maintenance of bilingual programs. In conclusion, the authors questioned whether schools should play a role in helping Indigenous people maintain their languages, arguing for children’s families and communities to teach traditional language and culture to their children (Devlin, 2011). The authors noted strong community support for bilingual education but gave qualified support to continuing it, albeit with a name change from ‘both-ways’ to ‘two-way’.
The policy decision following the ‘Collins Review’ was that bilingual education was formally changed to two-way learning and local languages were to be used primarily as a means of teaching English literacy. A key difference noted in policy was the government’s decision to track student attendance and progress much more rigorously (Lugg, 2004 as cited in Devlin, 2011). The release of the report highlighted for many Indigenous communities the lack of past consultation or consideration of family and community concerns:

Now we think that no-one in the Education Department have read our reports because now you are paying people to come and ask us what we want again. Every year you ask us and every year we tell you but you don’t listen to what we say (Community Elder, cited in Collins and Lea, 1999, p.37).

This highlights the sense of exclusion felt by Aboriginal people from the design and development of education policies and programs.

The two-way approach aimed to address some of the limitations of bilingual models as many Aboriginal leaders recognised Indigenous language learning is not sufficient. Two-way is a philosophy of education that ‘brings together Indigenous Australian traditions of knowledge and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural contexts, and embraces values of respect, tolerance and diversity’ (Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, 2017). Harris (1990, p.48) defined two-way Aboriginal schooling as:

[A] strategy to help make the matter of choice real in both worlds. Bicultural education is seen to be essential to provide opportunity for the primary Aboriginal identity to stay strong, though changing, and thus continue to be the source of inner strength and security necessary for dealing with the Western world.

The concept of ‘two-way’ recognises that many Aboriginal children face the difficult task of negotiating more than one culture. According to Noel Pearson (2009, p.23), some Aboriginal people have a “huge hesitation” about ‘Western’ education. Many are afraid of their children losing their identity and culture.

Often in a post-colonial context, the growing recognition and use of Indigenous education methodologies is offered as a response to the erosion and loss of Indigenous knowledge. In recent years, the NT Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET-NT) has attempted to meet the needs of Indigenous students as outlined in the NT Indigenous Education Strategic Plan (2006-2009):

The inherent right of Aboriginal students [is] to fair, equitable, culturally inclusive educational opportunities so that all students obtain a high quality
education as a platform for enriching their life chances and achieving their full potential. It is the responsibility of the department to provide supportive and culturally inclusive learning environments for Aboriginal students (DEET-NT, 2006).

With proper implementation, two-way schooling was seen to be essential for closing the educational gap. In 2006, DEET-NT formally included Aboriginal pedagogy in the curriculum, which was offered as a response to cultural erosion and loss of indigenous knowledge. DEET-NT policies apply to all schools, although teachers in most of the two-way schools are not indigenous so the efficacy of such policies is expected to vary.

In 2009, the Rudd government gave formal support for The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007), which states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning (Article 14 (1)).

The main theme of the declaration is self-determination; building community capacity, participation and control in economic, cultural and social development.

The Declaration clearly goes beyond simply achieving scholastic results, talking specifically about both cultural and social development.

Aboriginal education usually refers to the inclusion within formal and non-formal education systems of Indigenous epistemology including knowledge, models, methods and content (Yunkaporta, 2009). The two-way model engages with the fundamental base of Aboriginal epistemologies, their ways of knowing. Teaching and learning practices are integral to knowledge itself, so full two-way schooling also involves pedagogical styles that support the students’ learning and are attached to what is being learnt. Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in schools is a key action for all State and Territory Education Departments (ACARA, 2017), so even schools that do not explicitly implement the two-way model have the opportunity to implement bilingual and bicultural pedagogy through ‘localisation’.

The Northern Territory Department of Education has emphasised cultural preservation through first language programs, but has also implemented policies that in some respects arguably prioritise the dominant Eurocentric culture, such as the ‘First Four Hours’ language policy which operated between 2009 and 2012 (DEET-NT, 2008). Now abolished, the policy required teachers to deliver lessons for the first
four hours of schooling in Standard Australian English (SAE) in communities where English was not a first language. The reason for the policy shift was said to be the poor comparative performance of remote NT students on the national skills test in 2008, particularly the scores obtained by students in bilingual programs (Devlin, 2010). The then NT Chief Minister, Paul Henderson, deplored the results and shifted blame to the students: “All of the evidence shows that those students are not doing well, they need to do better” (cited in Devlin, 2009, p. 3).

The First Four Hours policy had a broad adverse effect in that school attendance decreased and children found it difficult to keep up with the curriculum (Dickson, 2010). The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was launched by Prime Minister Howard “to achieve literacy and numeracy for indigenous students at levels comparable to those achieved by other young Australians” (DEST-Cwth, 2003, p.5). The Four Hours policy was an assimilationist intervention as the emphasis placed on learning English dominated the objectives and priorities of the education system and educators themselves (Perso, 2012).

In 2013, Bruce Wilson undertook the first comprehensive review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (NT) since Learning Lessons (Collins & Lea, 1999). His report, A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory (Wilson, 2014), found Indigenous education raises complex technical and practical issues. The intractable problems in the delivery and conduct of education for this very disadvantaged group of young people require a strategy covering all the many elements affecting student outcomes (Wilson, 2014, p. 2).

Wilson identified that specific challenges in the NT include the number and proportion of Indigenous children who enter school with little or no English. In some schools, this approaches 100 per cent (Wilson, 2014). In some cases, schools establish initial literacy in the first languages spoken by these children. Further, there is now a large body of research concerning the significance of the early years of learning (Jo-Taylor, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2013; UNICEF, 2012). Children who fail in the early years to lay a foundation of basic skills are unlikely ever to recover (Wilson, 2014). The review acknowledges and supports the role of students’ first languages and supports their teaching (Wilson, 2014). The Wilson review (2014) is also notable because of its acceptance of the discourse of dysfunction in relation to Aboriginal communities.
On the scholastic side, Aboriginal educationalist Chris Sarra (2011a, 2011b) identified several additional factors that contribute to poor NAPLAN scores, which include low expectations of Indigenous students by education departments, principals, teachers, parents and students themselves. These lower expectations operate in mainstream as well as indigenous schools.

The ‘failure’ of the educational initiatives to ‘Close the Gap’ has been related to the failure of ACARA to include the full range of cognitive, social, epistemological and ontological perspectives in ‘Aboriginal content’ in the Australian curriculum (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). And this is, of course, a challenge compounded by the background of many teachers who belong to the cultural mainstream.

In addition to the withdrawal of funding for bilingual schools, challenges for bilingual children include the rules of national testing. “All kids are treated as if they are English speakers – but actually 40 percent of NT children are not English speakers - they are becoming English speakers” (McMahon, as cited in Salleh, 2017) Further, “[t]eachers are not permitted to translate [NAPLAN] questions into the child’s first language, and this is a barrier for testing their true knowledge of a subject like maths”. Jarvis Ryan, a former teacher at Yirrkala4 and President of the Australian Education Union said:

> In my view, NAPLAN is not a useful way of ascertaining where remote and indigenous students are up to in their learning because it is a standardised test that doesn’t take into account the children’s circumstances (as cited in Salleh, 2017).

According to Fogarty & Schwab (2012), poor NAPLAN results are not an accurate or fair reflection of teachers or the schools they work in:

> [w]e have had 10 years of back to basics, literacy and numeracy programs in schools aimed at lifting NAPLAN scores. The poor scores reflect the deep social inequalities in our education system that relates to the failure of education systems to fully embrace culturally appropriate methodologies.

Teachers and schools have directed their attention to improving the children’s NAPLAN scores at the expense of their broader needs. The current challenges facing Indigenous children extend beyond language barriers; embedding Indigenous

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4 Yirrkala School has a history of Yolngu teachers and assistant teachers working alongside non-indigenous teachers to deliver "both ways" education. Accessed 2017, August 18 from: (https://web.ntschools.net/w/yirrkala/Pages/Home.aspx).
perspectives in western academic institutions has been compromised while pursuing inclusion of Aboriginal content (Yunkaporta, 2009). Given the difference between Aboriginal and western epistemologies, it is not surprising that there is also a significant difference in pedagogies.

**Separatist policies**

“The great majority of Australians who currently identify as ‘Indigenous’ speak English, live in suburbs… and many of them do quite well in the mainstream economy and society” (Price & Price, 2013, p.193). A substantial minority, 12% of Indigenous Australians, live in remote Australia, speaking traditional languages, and are trying to hold onto the remaining elements of traditional culture, largely alienated from the mainstream economy and culture. Aboriginals living in camps are arguably the most marginalised and most oppressed and are often subject to ‘separatist’ government policies. Consistent with feminist alternatives (hooks, 1990), a pro-separatist vision includes development of Aboriginal education systems that support strategic separatism. Discussion of the specific issues confronting Aboriginals in the Northern Territory, and the issues causing their disadvantage, seem to be embedded in two opposed positions: integration or separatism.

Prominent Aboriginal intellectual Marcia Langton (2011) argued that disadvantage is a predictable post-colonial dilemma in the context of extreme situations in which the state and its subalterns conflict. Langton (2011) links this dilemma to the failure of self-determination policies and the crisis of liberal multiculturalism. Langton blames anthropologists who produce ethnographies of an Aboriginal world supported by hunter-gatherer economies and ways of life that no longer exist in much of Australia. Where these societies do exist, she says, they are compromised by modern welfare dependency, modern consumerism, and the rapid transition to modernity (Langton, 2011).

In 2012, at the Melbourne Writers Festival, in a speech on indigenous exceptionalism and constitutional race power, Langton challenged indigenous notions of entitlement that may actually limit opportunities for indigenous people to realise success. Langton (2012) argues that ending the colonial commitment to race and the era of indigenous exceptionalism will require imagining an Australian society in which we see each other as individuals, each unique and with a multitude of characteristics, “where being Aboriginal would be a simple acknowledgement of historical fact and our aspiration
for cultural maintenance an unarguably reasonable one.” Within this paradigm, Langton (2012) argues that Aboriginal people should be educated in the same way as the wider community, and would become less dependent on government handouts.

Prominent Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social commentators and academics argue that some elements of traditional culture need to be discarded, and that separatist schools support the continuation of unhealthy cultural practices (Hughes, 2005; Langton, 2012). Hughes argues that ‘separatist’ policies are a form of ‘positive discrimination’ and have resulted in new depths of deprivation for Aboriginal people, and specifically for children attending Aboriginal schools with bilingual programs (Hughes, 2008, p.31). Separatist schools “have to introduce normal curriculum as they have in Melbourne, London, or New York” (Anderson, 2013, p.112). Dave and Bess Price (2013) assert there is a need to change the cultural context of separatist schools and teach only in English. An alternative, they argue, is for Aboriginal children to be financially supported to attend boarding school, which aligns with the earlier views publicly expressed by Noel Pearson (2004). These approaches to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage reflect neo-conservative ideologies, and an anti-separatist stance. McMullen (2013) asserts neo-liberalism is shaping the agenda for control of Aboriginal lands and the assimilation of Indigenous people. To elaborate, ‘this involves controlling what is still perceived as the ‘Aboriginal problem’ and forcing social transition from traditional values and cultural practices to mainstream practice (McMullen, 2013, p.115).

With persistent attempts to force Aboriginal people off their homelands and into the mainstream context, current policy is evidently developed within an integrationist framework. Hughes (2005) noted, “Integration is the only way to end the cycle of despair”, while more recently Jarrett (2013, pp. 37-55) describes many remote communities as ‘sick societies’, failing to conform to mainstream norms and etiquettes. Some scholars attribute the prevalence of disadvantage in remote communities to a lack of integration (Pearson, 2009). Langton (2009) and Hughes & Hughes (2009) argue there is a political imperative to integrate Aboriginal people into mainstream Australian society, and that for many Aboriginal children this is successful. Hughes (2008) argues that 80% of Aboriginal people are not experiencing disadvantage and participate competently in the dominant cultural mainstream. The integrationist school of thought is reflected in the perspectives of dominant voices on Aboriginal issues, including Stephanie Jarrett (2013) who argues, “Australia is now
reaching the endgame of the separatist era in Aboriginal policy” while Cowlishaw (2010a, p.222) notes “[w]e are told that the self-determination policy era was wrong to be nurturing culture”.

Sutton (2009) explains that a section of the Australian public has become comfortable with a highly romanticised view of ‘the classical Aboriginal past’ and believes a sustaining fiction that solutions to reducing inequality lie in politicised visions of indigenous separatism. According to Sutton (2009), the instincts of progressives have been dulled by their belief in the “sanctity of cultural difference”. There are assumptions that traditional culture is a barrier to socio-economic progress of Indigenous Australians that underpins much of the assimilationist viewpoint, and is well encapsulated by Johns: “There are parts of Aboriginal culture that retard Aboriginal advancement” (as cited in Dockery, 2010, p. 28).

Austin-Broos (2011) interrogates the argument about material inequalities affecting remote Aboriginal communities and analyses counter arguments, which understand inequality as cultural difference and not as a result of operating outside mainstream institutions in separatist spheres. She argues two-way schools as separatist institutions are not the cause of educational failure for Aboriginal children, and that forced integration may even result in sacrificing elements of Aboriginal [traditional] culture, which may in turn have a negative impact upon their wellbeing (Dockery, 2010). Dockery argues that we should not be pursuing employment outcomes, economic participation at any cost, as “surely past experience has taught us that much” (2010, p.3)

Anthropologists, including Altman (2010, 2011) and Cowlishaw (2007; 2009), who operate from a pro-separatist position, and indigenous theorist Nakata (2002, 2011) have argued that persistent engagement in dialogue through one of these two perspectives (separatist/integrationist) narrows the scope of understanding the circumstances of Aboriginal people and has not enabled any real progress in the last decade. Cowlishaw argues that we “must go further [beyond the debates] and analyse how implementation of policy is lived out by those affected by it” (Cowlishaw, 2010b, p. 312).
Aboriginal children in the NT

The context - the escalating crisis in remote NT

From as early as 1999, remote Aboriginal Australia has been consistently positioned as in ‘crisis’ and critical public debate takes aim at self-determination approaches (Altman & Hinkson, 2010). While there has been increased attention on the circumstances of Aboriginal people living in remote communities, there is widespread disagreement about how the circumstances should be identified and responded to (Altman & Hinkson, 2010). McMullen (2013) argues that the endless portrayal of the Northern Territory as a failed state by neo-liberals, is informed by a focused ‘attack’ on Aboriginal culture, insisting attachment to land and communal living is out-dated. The focus on the escalating crisis in remote Australia caught the attention of mainstream media in 2007 and motivated the Northern Territory government to commission an inquiry: *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle Little Children are Sacred* (NT Board of Enquiry into the protection of Aboriginal Children, 2007). Travelling all over the Territory, the Enquiry gathered feedback from more than 260 meetings with individuals, agencies and organisations, and visited 45 communities to talk with local people to investigate the ways Aboriginal children could be protected from sexual abuse (Magarey, 2007). The report concluded that neglect of children in Aboriginal communities had reached crisis levels and the authors made 97 recommendations relating to child abuse and neglect in regional Aboriginal communities. The recommendations of the *Little Children are Sacred* report were later discovered not to have been adopted by the Territory government. Arguably, the researchers were inherently biased as the inquiry was to find better ways to protect Aboriginal children from sexual abuse, based on an assumption that child abuse was prevalent. The recent Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) submission to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory presents data that challenges claims of child high child sexual abuse rates for Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory, demonstrating the need to consider a wider problem given that almost half of all notifications to child protection services were for neglect (SNAICC, 2017). Pilger (2014) argued that abhorrent racist ideas still inform government responses to Aboriginal Australia, especially in the Northern Territory where Aboriginal communities continue to experience the degradation of forced separation, intensified by the release of the *Little Children are Sacred* report.
In response to findings of the Little Children are Sacred report, and with the support of Marcia Langton, in June 2007 the Howard Government mobilised the armed forces and Australian Federal Police to enter remote Aboriginal communities, including the community at the centre of this research, ostensibly to prevent child sexual abuse. The Commonwealth Government’s ‘Emergency Intervention’ in the Northern Territory legislated income management and the destruction of the limited work opportunities previously provided by Community Development and Employment Programs (CDEP). A year after the intervention, some 8,000 CDEP jobs had gone (McMullen, 2008). In July 2009, CDEP was replaced with Job Services Australia in regions with ‘established economies’, a move described by Altman (2007a, 2007c) as neo-paternalistic. According to Altman (2007a, p.307) “this radical plan was to fundamentally transform kin-based societies to market based ones”. In remote areas, new participants were redirected to income support directly from Centrelink. Such punitive legislation is still affecting remote communities, seeing growing numbers of Aboriginal residents moving into NT towns and cities (Altman, 2010a), the ideal outcome for proponents of integrationist approaches to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage.

Gillian Cowlishaw (2012) later argued that the Commonwealth government’s ‘Emergency Intervention’ in the Northern Territory was the end of the self-determination policy era. The main effects of this latest policy change, and evident resurgence of assimilation in remote communities, reinforce an old and familiar sense of being governed by external and somewhat alien powers whose reasons and purposes are not well understood, thus adding to a longstanding resentful distancing of people from officials and their messages (Hunter, 2007a; Cowlishaw, 2010a; Altman, 2011). This resentment is echoed in the sentiments of 2015 NAIDOC Person of the Year, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks:

> Of course the response is going to be anger. Of course they’re (the children) [are] going to feel that they have lost belief in any fairness within the system and many of them are resorting to what is known as antisocial behaviour in Alice Springs (2015, p. 16).

The ‘Emergency Intervention’ has since been extended through the Commonwealth’s Stronger Futures Northern Territory Policy (Moore, 2012), further challenging the capacity of Aboriginal people to exercise autonomy and agency in all areas of their lives, which undoubtedly has implications for wellbeing.
Wellbeing

Wellbeing overview

Wellbeing can be described as a stable state of ‘being well’ but it is also more than just achieving a state of happiness (AIHW, 2009a). A simple definition of wellbeing is based on an understanding of a child’s needs, both primary and secondary including food, shelter and love, affection and security (Woodhead, Montgomery & Burr, 2003). The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes wellbeing as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing’ (WHO, 2014), while the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) regards wellbeing as a complex combination of a person’s physical, mental, social, and economic factors (OECD, 2001). This latter definition posits health as a social issue, a claim borne out by evidence which demonstrates that standards of health have varied over time and also from one society, culture and country to another (WHO, 2008; Parker & Milroy, 2014).

The study of wellbeing is divided by some into subjective and objective wellbeing (Ben-Arieh, 2008; UNICEF, 2007; Noble et al., 2008). Subjectively, wellbeing is often understood at the individual level through self-perceptions of wellness (Foster, Boomer & Keller, 2007). Certainly wellbeing is not just material progress measured by income or Gross Domestic Product as “wellbeing is multidimensional encompassing all aspects of human life” (Conceição & Bandura, 2008, p.2). It is evident that on almost any conceivable measure of wellbeing, Indigenous Australians are experiencing disadvantage (SCRGSP, 2016a).

Atkinson (2002) argued that reliance on biomedical indicators of Indigenous health “fails to embrace the less easily measured aspects of community living and wellbeing, now deemed to be of prime importance by Indigenous peoples”. According to Ganesharajah (2008), the idea of wellbeing for Indigenous Australians is broader and more inclusive than western conceptions of health, incorporating a holistic understanding of wellbeing that includes socio-economic wellbeing, cultural wellbeing, mental wellbeing, physical wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing and communal wellbeing. Manderson (2005, p.15-16) argued that it is possible for a person to be physically unwell, incapacitated or diseased and still feel a sense of wellbeing.
The concept of wellbeing has specific application for Indigenous people, referring to the particular circumstances of the Indigenous people in settler colonial societies such as Australia.

**Living circumstances**

Many of the risk factors for the wellbeing of individuals may be inherent in the conditions in which they live (Bailie, Stevens, McDonald, Brewster & Guthridge, 2010). Of the Northern Territory population of 211,945 (ABS, 2015), 30% are Indigenous and 70% of these live in several hundred remote communities (ABS, 2015) ranging from a single family to 3000 residents. Formally, town camps and bush camps are defined as 'discrete Indigenous communities’ which is an area bounded by physical or cadastral (legal) boundaries and inhabited or intended to be inhabited predominantly by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people (ABS, 2006b).

Discrete communities are a product of colonial policies as most are predominantly indigenous townships that were the settlements and missions of the assimilation era (Altman, 2006, p.8). Up until 1972, residents in these communities were governed under the assimilation policy and lived under direct government control; since then the control has been largely indirect (Altman, Biddle & Hunter, 2008). The life styles of Aboriginal people living in ‘discrete’ communities are not widely understood as the locations are difficult to access and the communities are often ‘closed’ to outsiders.

**Culture**

The role of culture for Aboriginal children living in discrete communities is often understood as though Aboriginal children negotiate distinct cultures. The cultural needs thus include connections to history, personal identity, extended family and community, cultural expression and values, beliefs and practices (SNAICC, 2012). The term ‘traditional’ is used to mean a distinctive indigenous culture that has roots in people’s historical customs, practices and experiences (Reynolds, 2005). Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick, an Elder from the remote NT community of Lajamanu, described culture as a process:

> Culture is being able to listen to country. Country has a habit of teaching us about ourselves. If we know how to listen to country, she will sustain us with all our sense of belonging. Cultural identity is the home within each of us (cited in Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes & Box, 2008).
Green (2000) says that being Aboriginal involves having cultural identity that is tied to the land (as cited in Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). How Aboriginal one ‘feels’ is heavily influenced by association with the cultural community and aspects of culture itself (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012). In a world where the original culture has been subject to significant intervention (like indigenous culture in Australia) and the people have moved into a modern world, exactly what constitutes ‘traditional’ culture today is unclear. According to Colquhoun & Dockery (2012) cultures evolve over time and are likely to be far removed from the actual customs and practices of the ancestors. What appears as central to the healthy and successful development of Aboriginal children is learning about their culture and understanding that this familiarity with culture can sit within a mainstream, western context. Nakata described this meeting site as the ‘cultural interface’, which is: the intersection of the Western and Indigenous domains…the place where we live and learn (Nakata, 2002, p. 285). Nakata argues that Indigenous people do not move between cultural domains because the boundaries are not that clear-as active agents living in the world, they live at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2002, p.285).

The experiences of Aboriginal children will be investigated through consideration of the complexity of living at the intersection of cultural domains, alert to the theoretical problems associated with beginning from principles based in a duality between ‘culture’ and mainstream. According to Nakata (2002), the very separation of the Western and Indigenous knowledge systems, leads to simplifications that obscure the practices, perspectives and experiences at the cultural interface.

Aboriginal families living in discrete communities are living in neither traditional nor standard Australian conditions. With respect to traditional practices, few eat traditional food. Their lives are mostly sedentary; which is also inconsistent with traditional life (Chitts, 2009).

Compared to people of western cultures, those in more collectivistic cultures, including Australia’s indigenous people, assess their happiness by reference to the quality of life experienced by those around them; for example, family and community (Hofstede & McCrae, 2007). This reflects Phillip’s (2004) view that indigenous children’s emotional relationships are naturally developed and flourish due to the concentrated space and the common ways of knowing one another. Collectivistic cultures only emphasise individual wellbeing in relation to impacts on the overall wellbeing of the community collective (Diener & Tov, 2007). Individuals from
collective cultures can gain a sense of happiness from suppressing their own needs in favour of promoting the enhancement of the collective’s wellbeing (Hofstede & McCrae, 2007). There is a sense of happiness achieved from this level of ‘self-sacrifice’, which has positive implications for subjective wellbeing. This differs from the subjective wellbeing of individuals within a western cultural background, where suppressing one’s desires and perceived needs could have negative implications for wellbeing. Thus, an individual’s cultural background can influence perceived priorities, which in turn impacts subjective wellbeing. For example, engaging in behaviour consistent with cultural norms can produce a level of life satisfaction, which in a different social context may actually have negative implications for wellbeing. Therefore, cultural context is important when considering how wellbeing can be understood.

Thus, the factors that contribute to the wellbeing of Indigenous people are likely to differ from those for non-indigenous Australians, and such differences in preferences can be expected to result largely from cultural differences (Uchida, Norasakkunkit & Kitayama, 2004). This raises questions surrounding the appropriateness of standard socio-economic indicators. The non-acceptance of the legitimacy of different preferences founded in Indigenous culture includes recognition that “the trade-off between culture and socio-economic outcomes will differ across individuals according to their job-readiness; their existing degree of cultural attachment and their preferences among other factors” (Dockery, 2010, p. 5).

Health

Indigenous people, including children, living in remote communities experience significantly poorer health and socio-economic conditions than the general Australian population (AIHW, 2009a, 2016). In terms of physical health, Indigenous children and young people experience higher rates of infection and illness and are twice as likely to suffer from disability or long-term conditions as their non-indigenous peers (AHMAC, 2011).

While it is common for Aboriginal people to be blamed for poor income management that may lead to food insecurity, alternative explanations have been offered: food access and consumption is associated with residential segregation and impacts on children’s ability to experience a healthy diet (Foster, Mitchell, Ulrik & Williams, 2005). Trudgen (2000) has shown how colonial impacts on original hunter-gatherer
lifestyles have caused a breakdown in cultural practice related to allocation of food to certain family members.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s 2016 biannual ‘report card’ (AIHW, 2016) revealed the main contributors to the Indigenous life expectancy gap include: disease incidence and prevalence; health behaviours such as smoking; social determinants such as education, income and employment; and access to health services (AHMAC, 2011). It is important to note that the gap in life expectancy is a relative measure and, as such, the size of the gap is not just influenced by changes in Indigenous life expectancy but also by changes in the life expectancy of the non-indigenous population (AIHW, 2016). The AIHW reviews rely on national data sets and reported cases, such as hospital admissions, but many Aboriginal people remain hesitant to access health services. Furthermore, national health data is constantly being revised because of discoveries of errors or anomalies which compromise the validity of findings and highlight the limitations of national report cards as a method of gaining insight into the circumstances impacting on the health of Aboriginal people.

A critique of wellbeing discourse includes an analysis of colonial perspectives of wellbeing, and how it is understood for Aboriginal children. Aboriginal health is collectively defined, as “not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community…for Aboriginal people, this is seen in terms of the whole of life view incorporating the overall concept of life-death and the relationship to the land” (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, 1996). In a speech delivered by Tom Calma (2008), former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, he identified the National Aboriginal Health Strategy as ‘ahead of its time’ in developing a holistic view of health for Aboriginal peoples that includes being able to determine all aspects of life, including control over the physical environment, of dignity, of community, self-esteem and of justice”. Following this view, if ongoing opportunities for self-determination are denied, there are negative implications for health outcomes.

Kowal et al., argue that the state and its many agents produce a myriad of racialised statistics that quantify the elements that constitute “the good life” and strive to equalise the outcomes for non-indigenous and indigenous people: that is, to make the lines on the graph converge. Virtually every project at the [government] institute takes statistical equality as its rationale and its goal... ‘the gap’
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remaining as an organic barometer of continued colonial oppression (2007, p.342).

Failing to adequately capture and report culturally relevant priorities and outcomes for Aboriginal people arguably contributes to further misunderstandings about Aboriginal people and their lived experiences, and specifically for those who comprise the Aboriginal minority living in remote regions of the Northern Territory who have not fully enculturated into the dominant cultural mainstream.

Social circumstances

Despite governments’ and social scientists’ “growing capacity to represent social phenomena in quantitative terms” (Rowse, 2017, p.1), we are still no closer to ‘closing the gap’, specifically in addressing socio-economic inequalities confronting Aboriginal people. The scale of ‘the welfare dependency disaster’ (Pearson, 2009, 2011) and social dysfunction in remote communities has resulted in the scaling back of support for the development of autonomous services and self-determination is not a priority. According to Hughes and Warrin (cited in Kowal, 2007), Indigenous social pathology has flourished in communities that have been steered away from mainstream society. The ‘social pathology’ is evident in the high rates of family and community violence, child neglect and substance abuse in many remote Aboriginal communities. Trudgen argues that modern invasion of the ‘Aboriginal way’ has had devastating [social] impacts, including but not limited to alcoholism, substance abuse and domestic violence (2000). In her ethnography, Arrernte Present, Arrernte Past, Austin-Broos (2009) confronts the undeniable effects of alcohol abuse in Indigenous Central Australia. Austin-Broos (2009, p.10) argues that the suffering of Aboriginal people must be considered in the historical context of invasion, mission rule and poorly conceived [Indigenous] policies that have not assisted with the transition to modernity. In her view, the experiences of Aboriginal people in the present day are an outcome of the processes of structural violence that leads to ‘violence of the everyday’ in insecure and marginalised communities.

Domestic violence in Indigenous communities “will remain chronically undisclosed and under-reported,” an Australian Crime Commission investigation has found (ACC, 2016). Family and domestic violence in Aboriginal communities occurs against both females and males and is common in town camps (AIHW & AIFS, 2016). Bullying
and physical violence perpetrated by community members against each other is
known as lateral violence, often described as ‘internalised colonialism’ (Frankland &
Lewis, 2011). It is considered a product of a complex mix of historical, cultural and
social dynamics that results in a spectrum of behaviours (Calma, 2008). According to
Frankland & Lewis (2011), when consistently oppressed, individuals living with fear
and anger often turn on those closest to them. It is important to note, however, that the
social environment, not culture or ethnicity, is critical to understanding destructive
behaviour (Radford et al., 1999).

Recent innovative research on wellbeing points to the inter-relatedness of different
dimensions of wellbeing, arguing that wellbeing is solidly situated in a social context
(Nussbaum, 2009; Doyal & Gough 1992; White, 2008). While wellbeing is
consistently measured through various objective and subjective indices; applied
research that attempts to directly measure wellbeing promotes investigation of
children and their development as a key issue (Hamilton & Redmond, 2010).
Hamilton and Redmond (2010) consider the relationship between concepts of social
and emotional wellbeing and wider concepts of wellbeing. This approach is consistent
with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological approach to human development. An
ecological model of social and emotional wellbeing is based on interactions between
multiple environments such as the home, school and community, as well as the
individual and relational characteristics of the child – the result is a measuring of child
wellbeing across multiple dimensions within a human rights framework
(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Commonwealth initiatives that address the social and emotional wellbeing of
Aboriginal people are reflected in a number of policy developments in Aboriginal
Affairs. These initiatives are aimed at improving the social and emotional wellbeing
of Aboriginals, and continue to shape the evolution of Aboriginal mental health policy
that draws an important distinction between the two concepts. The focus is primarily
on subjective measures that include emotional wellbeing (the balance between
positive and negative feelings) and life satisfaction (Milroy, Dudgeon & Walker, 2014)
and considers elements of the contexts in which people live. Measuring the emotional
and social wellbeing of Aboriginal populations has been widely recognised as being

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of crucial importance to understanding the determinants of Aboriginal health, necessary to reduce health inequalities (see for example, Kowal et al., 2007; Garvey, 2008; Farnbarch, Eades & Hackett, 2015).

Violence and self-regulation

While worldwide it is agreed that children should not be subject to violence (UNICEF, 2017), and there is alarm expressed at the level of bullying and violence observed in some Aboriginal communities, there also exist balancing concerns about how changing the rules of a society affects people's wellbeing. Childhood trauma including abuse and neglect is considered to be the most important public health challenge (Van de Kolk, 2017). Children who are exposed to domestic violence may experience ongoing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is characterised by three main types of symptoms: re-experiencing the trauma through intrusive, distressing recollections of the event, flashbacks, and nightmares (Van de Kolk, 2017). As a result of having PTSD, a person may experience feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror. Such stress is likely to cause mental illness if it persists. A significant body of research shows a clear link between trauma and patterns of suicide, alcoholism, other drug misuse, physical inactivity, smoking and obesity (Muid, 2006; Atkinson, 2014). Furthermore, people with childhood histories of trauma make up almost our entire criminal justice population (Atkinson, 2014). But exactly what is considered violence and thus trauma by traditional Aboriginal communities? And how do the children currently living in these communities understand violence and trauma?

Physical violence, particularly within the family, is the focus of current national action to deal with what has been recognised as a growing problem in the whole community. This is not always the only kind of violence and, in Aboriginal communities; traditionally what the colonisers might call violence has been used officially to deal summarily with unacceptable behaviour. This ‘violence’ is seen, for example, in throwing a spear at the perpetrator of a ‘crime’ (Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2006). Following the punitive incident, the matter is forgotten. This contrasts with the western way of prolonging the punishment with extended gaol sentences, which can also be understood as a form of violence.

Indigenous people in Australia have experienced trauma as a result of colonisation, including the associated violence and loss of culture and land, as well as subsequent
policies such as the forced removal of children. Signs and symptoms of trauma in Aboriginal populations include: substance misuse, unremitting grief, shame and humiliation and a deep mistrust of self and others (Atkinson, 2014). Historical trauma is ‘the collective emotional and psychological injury, in the life of an individual or of a community, both over the life span and across generations’ (Muid, 2006, p. 36).

The risks to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, specifically, relate to problems that can result from unresolved grief and loss, trauma and abuse, domestic violence, removal from family, substance misuse, family breakdown, cultural dislocation, racism and discrimination, and social disadvantage (DHA-Cwth, 2004, p.9). If the developmental process is interrupted or fractured due to traumatic events, the implications for wellbeing can be severe. Children who experience trauma can suffer a range of symptoms that manifest in varied and complex ways. The manifestation of trauma is not easily identified or understood. The experience of trauma is compounded for children who may not have the vocabulary necessary to express intra-personal processes or the ability to identify the causes of their emotional distress. Negative implications of trauma may exist in the short term and for many persist into adulthood.

There has been an increasing awareness over time that trauma that has a negative impact on the victim is central to any consideration of disadvantage and the ways forward to closing the gap in disadvantage. In many Indigenous communities, trauma continues to be passed on from one generation to another. Trauma impacts the way children engage with others, particularly carers and teachers. Trauma ‘teaches the child or adolescent to focus on danger and survival, rather than on trust and learning” (Courtois & Ford, 2014, p.34). Milroy, Dudgeon & Walker (2014) argue that in order to work effectively with Aboriginal children, it is vital to understand cultural behaviours and child rearing practices as well as individual responses to trauma. Doing so can avoid misdiagnosing and mislabelling and help to develop effective interventions and behavioural responses.

Sanson, Hemphill, & Smart (2004) report research that says a child's temperament contributes to his/her wellbeing:

> [s]hyness and/or high reactivity have been found to be risk factors for anxiety; and high reactivity and/or poor self-regulation (especially of emotions but also of attention) are linked to the development of externalising problems such as aggression and oppositional behaviour. On the other hand, temperament traits such as good self-regulation and a calm, easy going style
(i.e. low reactivity) are associated with the development of good social skills and prosocial capacities such as empathy. A child's temperament style can also influence other people's reactions to the child.

Smart (2008) asserts that:

Each child has a different mix of temperament traits and they form part of his/her innate make-up. Children's temperament traits are visible from birth and believed to be biologically based, although they can be changed to some degree by the child's later experiences.

Some contest the idea that temperament traits are fixed:

Children learn to regulate thoughts, feelings, behaviours and emotion by watching and responding to adults’ self-regulation (Florez, 2011).

But if, as Smart (2008) concludes, reactivity and self-regulation are closely related to wellbeing, then the state of the children’s wellbeing can be exposed through their behaviour. The following definitions referred to by Sanson et al., (2004) are useful for conceptualising behavioural traits relevant to wellbeing:

- reactivity—the intensity or mildness with which a child acts and reacts;
- sociability—how at ease a child is when meeting new people or in new situations; and
- self-regulation—a child's ability to control his/her attention, emotions and behaviour.

Wellbeing, for Aboriginal people, emphasises the mental health of the individual, which is conceptualised as emotional and social wellbeing. While health and financial wellbeing are important, what happens in a person’s head ultimately determines their capacity to function in their circumstances. This approach emphasises the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community, and how these affect the individual (Burgess, 2005; Ganesharajah, 2009; Poroch, 2011; AIHW, 2014). Efforts to promote child and youth wellbeing in Indigenous communities must be grounded in an Aboriginal worldview as one’s world view can affect the way an individual perceives their life situation, which can have significant implications for levels of happiness (Hofstede, 2001; Dudgeon, Bray, D’Costa & Walker, 2017).

Research in western educational settings shows a strong correlation between children’s wellbeing and their socio-economic contexts, usually their family circumstances (Garvey, 2008). It is interesting then, that a number of schools for Australia’s more privileged children are developing what they call ‘wellness centres’ (Hutchinson, 2017).
Education and wellbeing

Wellbeing is a major factor in the educational achievement of children (Malin, Campbell & Agius, 1996; Vincent, Hazell, Allen & Griffiths, 2005; Noble et al., 2008), in particular because it affects their capacity to participate. Alexander (2012) reports that historically schools focused on knowledge and scholastic achievement; today, schools take a broader approach. The inclusion of social and emotional wellbeing programs, for example, indicates an increasingly student-centred approach. Schools and education authorities recognise the relationship between young people’s wellbeing and their behaviour and learning outcomes (Vincent, Hazell, Allen & Griffiths, 2005). There are now many school-based programs designed to build resilience or assist students at risk. Some initiatives go as far as to advocate a ‘whole school’ approach, where health and welfare are central to a school’s ethos (Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling & Carson, 2000). Benard (1991) has written about building student resilience through connectedness; arguing that all students can be helped to learn resilience and improve their wellbeing.

For many commentators, and for governments, the knowledge, skills and attributes learned through the curriculum and successful engagement with the education system are seen to enable increased opportunities for the individual, thus contributing to the economies of their societies (OECD, 2000). In educational settings, wellbeing is important for two reasons. The first is the recognition that schooling should not be just about academic outcomes but that it is about wellbeing of the ‘whole child’; the second is that students who have higher levels of wellbeing tend to have better cognitive outcomes at school (Dockery, 2010).

Children spend a significant amount of their time at school. It is not surprising then that schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation’s ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion (MCEETYA, 2008; Noble et al., 2008; Wilson, 2014).

In research, the focus is increasingly on wellbeing to develop an understanding of the responses needed to address the persistent disadvantage confronting many Aboriginals. What Works - Scoping Study into Approaches to Student Wellbeing (Noble et al., 2008) documents a broad definition of student wellbeing; links between student wellbeing and student learning; the impact on student learning of student
wellbeing issues such as poor nutrition and student or family drug abuse; the impact of a whole school approach on student wellbeing, and current NT government approaches to student wellbeing. Noble and colleagues (2008) identified wellbeing as a major factor in the educational achievement of children, in particular because it affects children’s development and capacity to engage in formal learning.

Internationally, the wellbeing of children in schools has attracted attention (Andersen, 2016), and in Australia it has been recognised that ‘preparedness for school’ has a major impact on children’s school achievements and thus their lives. Children cannot participate and benefit from school until they are ready, a point elaborated upon by UNICEF (2012) to mean that not only does the child need to be ready, but the parents of the child need to be ready to support him/her and the school needs to be ready for the student. In practice, children need to know how to manage themselves, how to socialise, how to interact with authority, and many more basic skills. Parents need to know how to support the child, to ease the transition from home to school, and to respond appropriately to the child’s needs as they develop. The schools need to be suitable for the particular children and in some cases this means having an appropriate curriculum for the particular children, localised and adapted if necessary.

School preparedness involves a number of people all being in the appropriate frame at the same time. Children who are not able to control their emotions, who do not know how to find comfort and support from a school community, who do not manage to fit into the regimes of the school, are not ready for schooling (UNICEF, 2012). Parents who are not able to support their children are not prepared for school and schools that do not accommodate the needs of the children involved are not prepared for the child’s schooling (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Given the growing interest in the role of wellbeing in education, and the fact that schools are the institutions that have the greatest contact and therefore potential influence on children’s development in their early years, it is timely to examine in detail what wellbeing looks like for individual children, and in this research, some disadvantaged Aboriginal children. More appropriate interventions are required by the current state of knowledge involving deeper understanding of the circumstances of disadvantaged Aboriginal children, and the factors that affect their wellbeing.
Conclusion

Wellbeing, as a western construct, is often applied through mainstream practices and approaches to identifying ‘wellness’ that actually may further disadvantage Aboriginal people. Research in this area has been undertaken largely within the framework of health, is usually funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), and is guided by transformative methods for Aboriginal health and wellbeing and wellbeing principles (NHMRC, 2002, 2005). More research needs to be undertaken with those who are responsible for the care and education of Aboriginal children to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges that affect their wellbeing.

The importance of studying the circumstances of children in remote schools is clear as there has not yet been significant improvements despite the ‘Closing the Gap’ initiatives. Research points to the importance of wellbeing for improved educational outcomes, but the circumstances of this cohort of children have not been investigated. As previous studies reviewed the statistical condition of Aboriginals by presenting outcomes at the aggregate level, what is needed is a more nuanced exploration of their circumstances; without inferred generalisation. As noted earlier, Cowlishaw (2010a, p.53) suggests “that a different way of thinking about Aboriginal remote conditions would be illuminating”, and has suggested one strategy to stimulate such a change would be “an ethnographic focus on everyday interactions which would produce some powerful empirical material with which to analyse and theorise the madness in remote communities”.

This chapter has shown that the research literature demonstrates conflicting views about the circumstances of Aboriginal children, factors contributing to their disadvantage and the most effective ways to transcend disadvantage. Quantitative data indicate trends and averages in performance across a range of dimensions. This thesis aims to fill this knowledge gap surrounding wellbeing by offering, in a post-colonial style, the voices of Aboriginal people describing their children and their students’ circumstances, serving to inform our understanding of what might be happening that affects the children.

While much is known about Aboriginal children in general, in this thesis the focus is on the individual state of each child, using the frame of wellbeing, which has implications for their capacity to engage in education and the wider world. Working
closely with a small cohort can illuminate the necessary qualitative detail about how the situation for an individual child is structured, described and thus understood, and approach that may assist policy makers.

The next chapter discusses the methodological approach adopted, the site of the School, and the research methods used to gauge some Aboriginal children’s wellbeing in a two-way school.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The previous chapter provided a review of literature related to Aboriginal people and, in some cases, Aboriginal children’s circumstances in the context of historical and contemporary policy approaches to addressing their disadvantage, generally, and in education, recently with an increasing focus on wellbeing.

The research started from the position of wanting to gain an understanding of the problems confronting the Aboriginal children and staff of the School. That meant setting the research priorities, a matter ultimately informed by the School Council. Recognising the challenges associated with documenting what the School Council allowed, the research also addressed issues such as who should speak, for whom, when and where which meant careful consideration of the questions, the ethics, the post-colonial perspective, and thus the methodology.

This chapter begins with a description of the research setting - a school in a remote area of Australia. This is followed by an introduction to the theoretical background that informed significant aspects of the methodology. The researcher’s social location is discussed through the lens of positionality, essential for constructing research in a post-colonial context. There is then an overview of the field work, and a description of the data collection. The methods of analysis are outlined and a discussion of the research methods concludes the chapter.

The Research Setting

The previous chapter considered the changing political and socio-economic contexts of Aboriginal people in remote Australia, who are identified as experiencing disadvantage on a range of measures. This section narrows the focus to the research setting which commences with an overview of the circumstances of Aboriginal children in education generally, and those children attending independent two-way remote schools in the Northern Territory specifically.

In 2016, there were 207,852 students enrolled in Australian schools identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ABS, 2016b). Approximately 86 per cent of Indigenous students are enrolled in government schools and about 14 per cent of students in schools in remote communities; 10.5% are enrolled in Catholic schools,
and 5.6% in independent schools. The Association of Independent Schools Northern Territory (AISNT) represents and promotes the independent school sector in the region. 20 independent schools in the Northern Territory cater for 6000 students. Five independent schools are Indigenous (AISNT, 2017). The Australian Government is the main public funding source for non-government schools (AISNT, 2017). The School at the centre of this research is one of the five Indigenous independent schools represented by AISNT. Below is a more detailed description of relevant aspects of the School, illuminating unusual attributes of the research setting.

The School

The School was established on the edge of a rural town in 1974 by Indigenous Elders to provide ‘two-way’ education for Indigenous students of the region. It is an unusual school, a private school where all staff are employed by Aboriginal Elders. Despite having a white male principal, what happens is controlled and sanctioned by a Council of Aboriginal Elders. All the children of the School at the time of the research were Aboriginal.

The School has an enrolment of approximately 200 students and caters for children from pre-school to middle school (Year 10). The children come from town camps and outstations and are described as “some of the most disadvantaged students in Australia” (ACARA, 2017). English is not their first language (ACARA, 2017). Attendance on any given day is significantly less than 200 and according to recent data, attendance rates average around 60% (ACARA, 2017).

The School has an Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA) value of 557, which represents extreme educational disadvantage (ACARA, 2017). Perso has shown that school-level factors (a school’s geographical location and the proportion of Indigenous students a school caters for) need to be considered when summarising educational advantage or disadvantage at the school level (Perso, 2012). The ICSEA number does this. Other key factors in students’ family backgrounds (parents’ occupation, school education and non-school education) also have an influence on students’ educational outcomes.

The School’s Council (5 life members and 8 elected members), represent the many language groups in the local Aboriginal community. The Council's objectives, listed on their website at the time, include fostering community participation in education,
and the promotion of training programs for Indigenous people involved in the School\textsuperscript{6}. The School employs local community Elders specifically to assist with the two-way program, as well as managing and supporting the Aboriginal teaching assistants and others.

Many private schools promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. The School aims to respect Aboriginal and standard Australian cultures. It teaches literacy and numeracy and western skills following the Northern Territory/National Curriculum framework and also teaches four indigenous languages and related culture. All children have cultural lessons and excursions with Indigenous Elders. Co-curricular activities include the School's special nutrition and health programs, its Drum Atweme program and choir, its After School Care program, and its inter-school sport and involvement in local sporting competitions. The School has a large open-air swimming pool.

The School community includes employees from a range of cultures and ethnicities, with different levels of work, education and teaching experience. In determining the state of the children’s wellbeing and the influences on it, in many cases it was assumed it would be the Aboriginal participants who could best articulate the children’s position, especially where it closely resembled their own.

The School is run by men, with women only in classrooms or the office, although the four languages and culture teachers are women and the ‘head’ of their families. Traditionally, Aboriginal communities kept strictly to rules about men’s and women’s business. There was obviously going to be some difficulty within the School driven by the level to which men and women, mainstream and Aboriginal people could discuss issues. Some topics would have to be controlled, and some views on them as well, but such limits cannot be fixed, so discussion varies according to who is involved.

Many of the children who attend the School might have significant difficulties participating in mainstream schools. Many, if not most of the children at the School speak one or more Aboriginal languages before either Aboriginal English or Standard Australian English. A large number of children are living in ‘out of home’ circumstances for one reason or another.

\footnote{Unfortunately the date and location was not recorded.}
Many of the children at the School come from bush and town camps. The town camps are made up of family members or members of the same language groups (Foster et al., 2005). There are 19 town camps within the School’s catchment area, consisting of 188 houses and 72 tin sheds. The number of bush camps is unknown. People are in these ‘fringe camps’ for various reasons; some sites have been traditional camping areas over a long period for ceremonial purposes (Foster et al., 2005). Some residents moved to town to be closer to children who were forcibly removed under policies of assimilation and residential segregation (Law Reform Commission, 1986).

The School staff are not operating in a ‘standard’ school situation—the daily routine of such a school takes place amidst depressingly high rates of unemployment, early mortality, poor health, violence, crime, substance abuse and youth self-harm, and suicide (Fogarty & Schwab, 2012), and all such problems are present at the School.

**Unusual attributes of the School**

Students live up to 100 km from the School and their attendance depends on their being collected by the School bus each day and returned to their homes in the afternoon, again by the School bus. Many prepare themselves for school, and organise themselves for the bus trip in the morning, but not all succeed in doing this.

The School is the only school in Australia to offer four indigenous languages (AISNT, 2017) taught by Indigenous Elders. In addition, reading is taught using Aboriginal English readers as part of a program that progressively teaches children to sing, and then speak, Standard Australian English (James, 2016).

Helping children learn to read is a challenge at the School. The National Curriculum recognises that children learn to read best when the text is in their mother tongue (ACARA, 2011c). These children do not usually speak Standard Australian English (James & Pearn, 2011) so many of them will do better if books are in their first language, then perhaps in Aboriginal English, and then in Standard Australian English. The books used in the reading program are also available in the four indigenous languages taught at the School. The Honey Ant Reader approach lets children ‘see themselves’ and their own stories in text, enabling greater familiarity, confidence and enthusiasm for reading (Sarra, 2014).

Unlike in the vast majority of Australian schools, literacy in this school is a poly-lingual activity. Evaluation of such programs is not within the scope of this research but it is evident that such an approach is not evaluated by standard national testing.
Some of the few literate students attempt the NAPLAN tests but their performance indicates they are failing to achieve national minimum literacy standards (ACARA, 2017).

The School’s challenge is to prepare the children, as best it can, for life, including academic achievement, although future employment cannot be guaranteed. The children’s immediate wellbeing was described time and again as a priority. The challenge in this research was to investigate and represent the children’s predicament, framed as the wellbeing of the children at the School, using the views of those who care for them at the School.

**Research Techniques and Theories**

**Case study research**

Case study research investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its natural environment (Sarantakos, 1999) and can include a variety of data collection methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observation. Creswell (2003, p. 15) defines a case study as an in-depth exploration of a program, event, activity or process of one or more individuals, bound by a period of time and activity, through the collection of detailed information using a variety of data collection methods. There is always a question of matching the research methodology to the research question and, given the question for this research, a case study approach seemed to fit best.

The inclusion in the research of several schools was considered, with the idea that themes and findings could be verified across a larger research sample. Such comparative research is often used to identify areas of divergence and convergence with non-indigenous social patterns and trends (Mouzos, 2001). Recognising that current attempts to address disadvantage are embedded in state and national strategies that seek to homogenise the Aboriginal situation (Altman, 2009), this new research was designed to avoid comparative research thereby honouring the distinct nature of this one community context. Ultimately the research is focussed on a specific group of children located in a particular time period at a specific location.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Post-colonial ethnography

Post-colonial theory has been applied as the theoretical framework in this ethnographic case study to better understand the circumstances of a cohort of children, guided by ‘decolonising principles’ of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and rights and regulations of the researched (Chilisa, 2011, p. 21). Ethnographic research provides an important and valid way to find out what is happening. In this research, it could facilitate a deep process of enquiry and analysis of the lives of Aboriginal children. Historically, ethnographic fieldwork has been closely associated with participant observation, but it also utilises several other qualitative methods (Szava, 2015). The researcher had to negotiate the realisation that “qualitative research in its many forms, serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, for truth” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012, p.1). The best the researcher could do to counteract these inherent challenges and concerns was to embed the research design in post-colonialism, and centre the voices of the colonised.

Post-colonial scholarship recognises the imperial legacy of colonising research practice that has neglected to listen, pay attention and acknowledge and create space for the voices of the other and their knowledge systems. The post-colonial ethnographer has a responsibility to the community and participants to ensure inclusion of their ways of knowing. The researcher acknowledged that the participants were themselves experts in the field of enquiry.

The central premise of post-colonial theory is that colonial rule has created the dichotomy of the coloniser as “knower” and the colonised as “ignorant” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 39). Following this view, post-colonial scholars argue that knowledge production from the interpretive paradigm has been socially constructed using Euro-Western philosophies, cultures, and a long history of an application and practice of knowledge production that excludes the world views of former colonised societies (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Smith, 2011). To expand ethnographic perspectives on Aboriginal children’s circumstances, it was essential for the methodologies to explore power relations that may shape the research agenda while identifying bias that may impact on the credibility of research findings. A post-colonial approach must reveal existing power relations.
Smith (2012) quotes Fanon and Nandy as claiming that historically Aboriginal people have been exploited by researchers. Nandy (1988), Fanon (1963) and others have claimed imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to the colonised peoples, disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their social relations, and their own ways of thinking and feeling and interacting with the world. Smith (2012, p. 28) argues that exclusion of indigenous people in the research process and misrepresentation of indigenous ways of knowing and being, underpins the struggle for self-determination. Guided by post-colonial discourses of representation, the research aimed to address ongoing patterns of western imperialism that have been widely recognised as perpetuating racial inequalities (Mignolo, 2009). This means ‘decolonality’ is both an epistemic and political project (Mignolo, 2009). The researcher respected the broader context in which people spoke. As outlined in Chapter 2, the legacy of colonialism has manifested and determined the socio-economic, racial and epistemological value systems of many Aboriginal communities. The members of the researched community are clearly vulnerable and the researcher was aware that she was often speaking to oppressed, colonised persons living in post-colonial situations of injustice.

Aiming for a ‘multi-voiced’ participatory epistemology, the researcher chose methods that may possibly decolonise western epistemologies. For many years, fieldwork about and in Aboriginal Australia was conducted by people who belonged to the white cultural domain and operated on the ‘other side’ of the cultural divide between Indigenous and non-indigenous. Such an approach has been criticised for drawing primarily on the concerns and interests of non-Aboriginal researchers (Smith, 1999; Yunkaporta, 2009; Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), resulting in a continuation of ‘neo-colonial dominance of majority interests’ (Bishop, 2005, p. 110). To overcome this inherent methodological bias, post-colonial methodologies involve “approaches to decolonise dominant research methodologies”, that

challenge the interpretivists to interrogate power relations between Western educated researchers, as colonisers using dominant methodologies that legitimise ideologies of dominant groups (Chilisa, 2012, p. 34).

Post-colonial indigenous research methodologies emphasise transforming conventional ways of knowledge production. The researcher was aware of numerous ‘decolonising’ methods, and although the methods chosen in this study could be seen to align with conventional data gathering tools, the Aboriginal
School Council approved the research design; it was agreed that the current approach would be the most effective way of ensuring inclusion of the Aboriginal standpoint.

Foley argues that although Aboriginal communities are culturally and geographically diverse, an Indigenous standpoint can be reached (2003). The Indigenous perspective is rarely recorded in the research literature. As Aboriginal people have been consistently under-represented to varying degrees through pervasive under-inclusion in research, the inclusion of Aboriginal participants in this study could not claim unfettered inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge, because the willingness of participants to offer insights into Aboriginal perspectives is influenced by the power imbalances that pervade transcultural research.

There are well-recognised links between the production of qualitative research and colonial power. Research about Aboriginal culture has traditionally been produced in a context of racial segregation and hierarchy (Cowlishaw, 1997). A researcher’s observations, interpretations, and their articulation are necessarily shaped by the situated knowledge, beliefs and commitment of the researcher (Bresler, 1996, p. 133), so it is possible to become aware of research bias and aim to address it. This can be addressed through an ongoing process of reflexivity, as suggested in the following section of this chapter.

Smith (2012, p. 2) describes the research setting as “a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of knowing the ‘other’”. The theoretical substance of post-colonial theory is organised around neo-colonialism that plays out in day-to-day interactions that serve to re-inscribe notions of power. Essentialism of the ‘orient’ can be organised around a binary axis by romanticising Aboriginal culture or assigning negative stereotypes that describe the homogenous conditions of Aboriginal people. To avoid being caught up in neo-colonial practices, post-colonial discourses consider the ways of understanding the different ways of knowing, acknowledging cultural hybridity (Ryan, 2008) and intersecting knowledge systems (Nakata, 2002, 2007). As a system of knowledge, Indigenous knowledge is understood from Western perspectives as ‘local knowledge’-knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society (Nakata, 2002). Translating these awarenesses into concrete research activities was to play close attention to the interests of the community and by representing honestly the voices and perspectives of indigenous participants.
Attempting to be an anti-essentialist project, it was important to acknowledge that ‘indigenous knowledge as subjugated knowledge’ appears to be re-conceptualised; the two-way schooling model aims to embed the views of local Aboriginals. In response to human rights violations, the community has claimed essential cultural characteristics for strategic purposes and it was anticipated that the ‘uncomfortable problem of cultural hybridity’ would emerge. In the processes of data analysis and dissemination of findings, the researcher paid attention to the intersecting knowledge systems at ‘the cultural interface’, acknowledging epistemic distinctions are hard to assert (Nakata, Keech & Bolt, 2012). The scope of this research, however, would not permit in-depth discourse analysis.

The chosen perspective for this thesis is therefore post-colonial; it prioritises the voices of Aboriginal participants who represent a historically silenced minority. It recognises that the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonised people (Smith, 2012).

Responsibility, as a pillar of post-colonialism, asserts that all parts of the research process are related and the researcher is accountable to all (Chilisa, 2011). The research operated in the ethnographic paradigm but by using reflexivity, was informed of the risks inherent in the researcher’s position. As such, the approach would involve the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution (Wolcott, 2008). For this, the researcher’s journal would provide evidence of the researcher’s changing attitudes and, indeed, her perceived role as revealed by participants.

Theory and formal texts often have an ‘endistancing’ effect with regard to the tangible lives of subjects (Tomaselli, Dyll & Francis, 2008). Rosaldo (1993) contradicts the need for detachment in research, highlighting the use of personal experience to strengthen the quality and integrity of research. Feelings, emotions, and the lived experience of the researcher, largely ignored in positivist approaches, thus “comprise one layer of the ethnographic approach” (Tomaselli et al., 2008). To present a deeper understanding of the lives of the School’s Aboriginal children, the researcher chose deep immersion. Clearly it would compromise her position as a non-Aboriginal researcher, but it would reveal many things that otherwise would not be heard or
witnessed. It is also important to remember that immersion alone does not guarantee a true understanding of the ‘objects’ studied (Rosaldo, 2004).

Baumann (2004) points to the problem that the researcher only reports what is of interest to them. Further, the nature of interpretation is less of a ‘truth’ and more of a reflection and comparison, and is filtered through her own culture. This potential bias was addressed by “bending back on self and looking more deeply at self-other interactions” (Tomaselli et al., 2008, p. 348).

**Positionality**
A post-colonial ethnographer must be aware of her positionality and take steps to address any issues it creates that might skew interpretation. Moreton-Robinson (2000) argues researchers may not always be aware of such power imbalances, or of the intricacies of researcher and participant encounters. Moreton-Robinson (2000) asserts that as social scientists, researchers are usually ill-equipped to explore the intergroup encounters and the dynamics of power relations, and she has urged researchers to acknowledge that power imbalances will occur. Moreton-Robinson (2000) also argues that undertaking ethical research with Aboriginal people requires in-depth self-analysis to identify and overcome power relationships.

Research processes typically involve two interlinked and complementary processes— academic research and the researcher’s ‘human voyage’ (Ellis, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To support the former while enduring the latter, it was essential that the researcher would be alert to assumptions, motivations and influences based on her cultural lens (on the spectrum of ethnocentricity or cultural relativity) that may create a cultural bias, such as ethnocentrism—judging another culture by the values and standards of one's own culture (Pirkey, 2015). Researchers can minimise bias by engaging in reflective practice; for instance, challenging values and assumptions recorded in a research journal. As a research approach it looks to “extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived” (Bochner, 2000, p.270).

For non-Indigenous, especially whites, working with Aboriginal people is transcultural research, and it involves members of the participant sample belonging to different social groups. These differences extend to acknowledging the ‘social location’ of self as the researcher, which will likely differ from the ‘social location’ of research participants (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Critical whiteness theory attempts to
redirect attention onto the white, naturalised self who occupies a position of power (Riggs, 2007). Even if the white researcher feels she ‘belongs’ in the community, power relations still exist and still need to be addressed. Over the course of the research process, the researcher would be increasingly aware of her own ‘white gaze’ but attention to the performance of ‘whiteness’ is an enormous challenge (Frankenberg, 1993). The naming of cultures and peoples is linked to naming and marking a host of ‘others’, while participating in the societal structure that grants all the privileges associated with the dominant cultural mainstream. The best the researcher could do was acknowledge that she was participating in a racialized social structure and reflexivity assisted in deepening her understanding of these insights.

From a qualitative point of view, the credibility and integrity of the research are contingent upon the researcher’s reflexive awareness of how their position might influence the process (Finlay & Gough, 2003). While “Researchers often have a personal investment in studying a particular topic” (Finlay & Gough 2003, p. 119), “it is through personal experience that a deeper understanding of the researched ‘other’ can be gained” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 68).

Ethnography situates the researcher from an ‘outsider’ perspective, so immersion and engagement would give the researcher ongoing opportunities to gain insight into the children’s lives as she transitioned between objective observer and subjective participant. The position of the researcher is, in some ways, similar to that of some of the adults at the School: white, female, middle class, urbane, but she was not be employed by the School (although some may have thought so), not subject to the rigours of managing the children at the School and, like many others who seemed to visit the School, somewhat ‘fly-in-fly-out’. Whatever role the researcher was to play; she was clearly not seen as ‘one of us’ within the School community. While this position could be understood by Council members and the Principal as potentially a strength for the resulting research, it presented problems for the researcher. Another ethical question related to a researcher involved in a qualitative study and simultaneously participating in the everyday running of the School. Any opportunity to engage in a general way seemed like a way to develop connections with the staff. Becoming one of the caring team seemed like an entrée into conversations with the staff. But such activities required awareness of the shifting subjectivities, the traversing of roles and responsibilities between researcher, tutor, assistant teacher, and colleague; friend, volunteer and parent.
To ensure respectful representation and to address the issue of power imbalances between the researcher and the participants, and the risk, as a member of the ‘colonising’ community, that the researcher would misrepresent the views of the ‘colonized’ (Smith, 2012), three main strategies would be adopted.

(1) To disrupt the cultural domains of ‘us and them’ or ‘insider - outsider’, a reflexivity journal was maintained by the researcher. This enabled critical awareness of her positionality as a non-indigenous researcher, and self-reflection that provided opportunities to identify and transgress the power relations associated with immersion in the culture of the socially constructed ‘other’. It also assisted the researcher to avoid using “embeddedness in the white cultural domain as a basis for reflexivity” (Cowlishaw, 1997, p. 101).

(2) Any ethnocentricity in the research would become apparent in the research methods as time went on and understanding of the circumstances increased, and the methods could be modified to better fit the context with consultation and collaboration with the School Council. Furthermore, the processes could be altered particularly in response to a growing awareness of the relationship between the Aboriginal staff and the researcher.

(3) Aboriginal theorists discuss the discourses of Aboriginal perspectives and experiences through various ideological and epistemological lenses so the research would need to integrate a multiplicity of perspectives. It drew in particular on the work of Maori theorist, Smith (1999; 2012), which was not to deny the authority of Australian Aboriginal theorists but to acknowledge how Smith has successfully negotiated similar terrain to that in which this research is situated, as many of the literary contributions of Smith are targeted towards guiding non-indigenous researchers to develop decolonised approaches that are ethical.

**Ethics and consent**

‘Rights and regulations’ as a pillar of post-colonial research include but are not limited to “ethics protocols that accord the marginalised and the colonised ownership of the research and the knowledge produced” (Chilisa, 2011, p.22). Ethics protocols promote respect for the researched and cooperation between the researchers and the researched. A post-colonial methodological approach requires ethics protocols that are informed by the value systems of the researched. Ethical considerations are embedded
in the ‘cultural context’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2000), which encompasses the design and facilitation of transcultural research. Smith (2012) notes:

> The work must represent Indigenous persons honestly, without distortion or stereotype, and the research should honour indigenous knowledge, customs and rituals (Smith, 2012).

Research on indigenous people must be ethical, performative, healing, transformative, and participatory. It must resist efforts to confine inquiry to a single paradigm or interpretive strategy, recognising that “critical indigenous qualitative research is always political” (Smith, 2012, p. 18). Before any action resulting from research is completed, the researcher should be accountable to indigenous persons so that they, not Western scholars, have first access to research findings and control over the distribution of knowledge (Semali & Kinchelow, 1999, p. 15).

For a research project working with Aboriginal children (although not formally including them as participants) and adults who, in many cases, could be considered ‘at risk’, there was a clear need for engagement and consultation with participants at each stage. Given these concerns, a research design that would be ethically respectful to Indigenous participants was essential. In designing this approach, guidance was obtained from the Guidelines for Ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities (NHRMC, 2005), and the six common values of “responsibility, reciprocity, respect, equality, survival and protection” (NHRMC, 2003), identified as important to Indigenous peoples, were considered. Mindful that “Research is almost always invasive and has the potential to harm participants” (Sarantakos, 1999), the main concern was to do no harm.

**Council Consent**

Reciprocity entails that both the community and the researcher derive benefits from the research (Chilisa, 2011, p.22). From the beginning, the Principal discussed the intended research with the Aboriginal School Council to ensure that the interests of the School were respected, declaring the researchers interests from the outset. This consultation continued throughout all stages of the data gathering process. Adopting a post-colonial perspective was seen as likely to help avoid perpetuating disempowering approaches that would probably have led to ethical difficulties in negotiations with members of the School Council. Careful consideration of the inherent power dynamics, the position of the researcher as understood by the Aboriginal participants,
and the ethical dimensions of any research into the lives of children of a colonised minority require a post-colonial approach to research.

The key notions outlined in this thesis relate to the collective ownership of group information, which includes indigenous people’s control over research and information about them. In the past, Aboriginal people have not been consulted about what information should be collected, who should gather that information, who should maintain it, and who should have access to it, and information gathered may or may not have been relevant to the questions, priorities and concerns of Aboriginal peoples. The Aboriginal School Council was therefore consulted on the research topic, questions and methods of data collection, all of which were negotiated in a collaborative effort to ensure principles of self-determination in research were upheld.

Consultation on the research was undertaken with the School Council through the School Principal. He presented the research proposal to Council members on 22 October 2012 and was able to discuss the research with them and to obtain their permission for the work. Discussion aimed to build trust to allow negotiation of ethical dilemmas that pertain to conducting research in Aboriginal communities (Schnarch, 2004). Council members had the opportunity to voice concerns about the research design. The Principal communicated amendments to the researcher.

Council members’ recommendations related to the research topic. They explained that greater awareness was needed about the daily challenges the School faces, specifically related to the children’s backgrounds and their needs. Members said that although government representatives visited the School on occasions for their own promotional work, the time they spent in the School with the School community was extremely brief, and it was unlikely that it yielded any real insights into School operations and activities, or the experiences of the staff and children. Additionally, the Council provided guidance on the participant sample and the recruitment of participants.

The School Council supported the research because they did not have the resources or expertise to tell their own story. They were open to independent research and encouraged the researcher to ‘tell it like it is’. That called for an understanding of the identified children’s worlds. The School Council did not feel it appropriate to directly involve the children in the research except by participant observation, so the research depended on working with those who work with the children, particularly the adults.
with whom the children spend a significant amount of time, and to whom the researcher had access through the School.

The Council did not want the children included as research participants lest that cause political and ethical problems. Not all the Aboriginal people involved speak English fluently, and many of them did not want to. In addition, western processes that are based on open discussion followed by clear decisions do not necessarily accommodate the more traditional Aboriginal processes that lead to consensus. Despite best efforts, the existing power imbalances meant that there was a risk that individual participants were more ‘informed’ than ‘consulted’. It also opened the research to potential pressure from some participants.

In a regular morning meeting, the Principal encouraged all members of staff to complete a research interview. He demonstrated his support by offering paid release time to teachers, mostly non-Aboriginal, while interviews were undertaken. Release time was not offered to other staff; many of whom were Aboriginal assistant teachers. It was later revealed by some participants that the Principal’s demonstrations of support for the research made them uneasy; they expressed concerns that the research process might gather and disclose information they revealed in interviews to executive staff. They said they thought the research was for the Principal and the researcher was accountable to him. Despite assurances of restrictions due to ethical practice and confidentiality agreements, some tension around the relationships lasted throughout all stages of the research. Nevertheless, without the Council’s and Principal’s support, the study would not have been possible.

**The School community as informants**

The main sampling strategy employed in the study was purposive sampling with criteria. A purposive sample is a non-probability sample that is selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study (Patton, 1990). The key criterion was that participants were employed as staff at the School or as associated professionals and program facilitators operating from the research site. Capturing insights into the children’s circumstances from staff who were not family or Aboriginal or long-time remote dwellers would have been problematic if the School staff retention was reflective of wider national averages. Teacher retention rates for remote schools’ average nine months (Mason & Matas, 2015), but some staff at the School have been there for more than five years. The Principal has retained his position for over 10 years and has extensive knowledge of the children’s situation and
the conditions confronting them and their families. Many school staff are actively involved in the children’s lives beyond the School setting and interactions occur with greater frequency than otherwise would be possible for staff employed in typical urban educational settings, where clear distinctions between school and home are easily made.

**Participant recruitment**

Eide and Allen (2005) developed a conceptual model to address the ethical implications for recruiting transcultural qualitative research participants, and to overcome the resultant challenges related to ‘social locations’ (Moreton-Robinson 2000). Based on their experience working with aboriginal Hawaiians, Eide and Allen (2005) note that social difference is a central challenge when ‘recruiting’ research participants. When the topic of investigation is the lives of the children, no particular people are more or less relevant to the data collection process. All available people in the research setting were included, avoiding the need for recruitment. In effect, the research participants in this study were self-selecting with different members of staff being free to choose to participate at different levels, and the permission granted for recording and reporting varied.

Eide and Allen (2005) advocate using their model to overcome the unequal power dynamics between researchers, who often belong to the dominant cultural group, and research participants, who are often members of a minority group. They argue that power imbalances can be overcome through a process of “personal knowing and being known”, (Eide & Allen, 2005). They claim that ‘knowing’ is crucial for the successful recruitment of participants from minority groups in an ethical manner that ensures that participation is voluntary. The research design was thus flexible and evolving to recognise Aboriginal people as having expert knowledge about themselves, their communities and their conditions (Smith, 2005).

**The stages of data gathering**

**Field Trips**

The research was situated in a remote school close to a rural town. The timing of visits to the School, in Australia’s Northern Territory, depended on the availability of time for the researcher, and on the hospitality of the School itself, its schedules and commitments. The School has accommodation that was made available for most of
the visiting period, but there were other periods where accommodation was in simple, local facilities or a private house.

If all that had to be achieved in a visit was a neat data-gathering activity such as a set of interviews, or observations, there would have been no need for three visits, but classroom time was chaotic in some cases, and recess periods were filled with additional tasks, planning for upcoming events, or simply discussion about what to do about something that needed urgent attention. Daily life of the School revolved around collecting the children, managing them and their day, and returning them safely to their homes. Time was very short for everyone and it could take a whole morning to just make contact with someone and possibly arrange a meeting with them. Absenteeism was also a problem for the research. Usually one or more staff was missing on any given day and their replacement was a priority. This meant juggling qualified and licensed staff at the last minute, and rarely was this preceded by lesson preparation that could be passed to the person now managing the class or event.

**Visit One**

The three week Visit One took place in July 2012 and set the scene for the work that would follow in later years. The first stage of fieldwork involved getting to know the School and the staff as a priority, as well as devising a negotiable research question for approval by the School Council. The key notions outlined in this thesis relate to the collective ownership of group information, which include First Nations control over research and information. In the past, Aboriginal people have not been consulted about what information should be collected, who should gather that information, who should maintain it, who should have access to it, and information gathered may or may not have been relevant to the questions, priorities and concerns of Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal School Council was therefore consulted on the research topic, questions and methods of data collection, all of which were negotiated in a collaborative effort to ensure principles of self-determination in research were upheld. Discussion with the School Council aimed to build trust to allow negotiation of ethical dilemmas that pertain to conducting research in Aboriginal communities (Schnarch, 2004). The researcher participated fully in School activities, helping staff when possible. When meals were delivered to the children in their homes, sometimes by their carers, sometimes by the Principal, the researcher had an opportunity to see the town camps and where the children live. She sometimes went on the daily School bus to the bush camps.
Mostly, the researcher acted as just another of the many people who volunteer to help at the School, and in so doing was able to gain useful insights into the daily running of the School and to get a better feel for the children and their circumstances. It was vital to not be seen as opportunistic, or judgmental, or as an additional burden to be managed by the staff. Fortunately, staff were generally grateful for assistance, and teachers were welcoming and friendly.

Early observations prompted concerns about the observer effect. Added to that was the recognition of the potential ‘Hawthorne effect’ (McCambridge, Whitton & Elbourne, 2014). The researcher started writing a journal.

On occasions, participants asked the researcher about her regular life, and her child, which sometimes allowed her to ask informally about theirs. Learning about the School and the background environment and finding out how to engage comfortably with the very different members of staff was a high priority for the researcher.

In the months following Visit One, the journal observations were analysed and used for the development of what was intended to be the interview schedule. The questions were reviewed and formally approved by the Aboriginal School Council prior to Visit Two.

**Visit Two**

The five week Visit Two took place in July and August 2013. The researcher reclaimed the roles she had previously held, but was curious as to how the participants would feel about her return. Most were friendly and more familiar. Some said it was unusual to get a return visit. There were a couple of new staff members, with whom she had to establish a relationship. After two weeks, she talked about her project at a morning staff meeting. She explained that she was not there to judge their teaching practice but to learn about the children’s lives. The Principal expressed support for her and promised release time for interviews for teaching staff.

In the next three weeks, 34 people were interviewed. Observations of the daily life of children and staff were recorded in a journal.

Following Visit Two and completion of the interviews, audio recordings and handwritten notes were transcribed. Journal observations were also reviewed. This process took 10 months.
Visit Three
The two week Visit Three was in August 2014. The aim was to engage participants in conversations about issues that still seemed confusing. It was clear that there were some recurring themes. A strategy suggested by Tomaselli et al., (2008) helped organise what was emerging about the children’s lives and, in turn, informed the things to be learnt on the third visit. The researcher created some representative scenarios to facilitate a process of data checking details with participants.

The methodology was evolving, consistent with a post-colonial research paradigm (Tomaselli et al., 2008). There was a need to gather some more data7. As expected, given the stability of School staff, only two teachers had left since the last visit. Interviews were undertaken with two more recently employed members of staff and two community Elders who were not available to be interviewed during Visit Two. Further observations were recorded.

After Visit Three, fresh interviews and observations were transcribed and analysed.

Methods of data collection
In order to develop an understanding of the children’s wellbeing and to gain deep and truthful insights from participants about the children, data from a variety of sources was generated through use of multiple methods, including a research journal, interviews, and observation. The post-colonial research paradigm requires the researcher to critically reflect on the self as knower, drawing attention to positionality; power and privilege (Chilisa, 2012, p. 14). The research journal was an important tool that facilitated reflexivity, as the researcher captured ‘self-conscious notations’ (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) paying particular attention to ethics and cultural sensitivity essential for conducting empowering research (Chilisa, 2012). Interviews were chosen as a strategy that would enable participants to contribute information about the children’s circumstances, based on their own perceptions, experiences and understandings of the underlying factors that may be contributing to the challenges in the children’s lives. Participant observations enabled the researcher to monitor the children in the school setting which was critical as the children were not included directly as participants. While formal observations were recorded, the researcher

7 Acceptance of the adjusted methodology was granted by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee- approval H9964.
“maintained a ‘professional’ distance that allowed adequate observation and recording of data” (Fetterman, 1998, pp. 34-35), recognising that observations are influenced by the researcher’s bias and worldview. Triangulating the data was a strategy to ‘get closer to what is happening, recognising that there is no single tangible ‘reality’ to be captured and presented as ‘truth’ about the children’s lives.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation is an important strategy for ensuring rigour (Liamputtong, 2009), and is typically a strategy (a test) for improving the validity and reliability of research or evaluation of findings as according to Patton (1999), a single method can never adequately shed light on a phenomenon. Mathison (1988, p. 13) elaborates this by saying: “Triangulation has raised an important methodological issue in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to evaluation [in order to] control bias and establishing valid propositions because traditional scientific techniques are incompatible with this alternate epistemology”. The study design allowed for methodological triangulation through multiple methods of data generation (Liamputtong, 2009).

In analysis, the researcher identified consistencies of findings could then be generated by different data collection methods (Patton, 1999). This strategy of triangulation ensured a “broader and more secure understanding of the issues” under investigation (Maxwell, 2005, p. 94). The combination of thematic and contextual analysis through application of the wellbeing framework provided another triangulation process. The process of triangulation enabled the researcher to analyse, compare and identify contentions and contradictions in what was observer and related.

**Iterative sampling**

Iterative sampling is a process where researchers move back and forth between selecting cases for data collection and engaging in a preliminary analysis of the cases sampled. The idea is that what emerges from data analysis will shape subsequent sampling decisions. Reviewing data in steps allows for making modifications/revisions to the instruments to test emerging analytic constructs, and for identification and disconfirmation of anomalous findings (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). At the end of Visit One, the researcher reviewed the notes recorded in the research journal. These notes, in addition to consultation with the School Council, informed the development of the interview schedule and participant sample that would be recruited the following year. What later was identified formally as wellbeing emerged
as an important concept for consideration in structuring details about the children’s circumstances. After completion of the interviews and observations in Visit Two, it was clear that an additional round of data gathering would need to be developed to further include the Elders’ ideas systems (knowledge, mores, values and emotions) as well as their behaviours and actions (Pelto, 2016) that might assist in understanding how children negotiate the cultural interface, widely recognised as important for cultural wellbeing. Elders who weren’t available to participate in interviews during Visit Two were invited to be interviewed during Visit Three.

The process of iterative sampling and analysis continued until the researcher reached saturation when no new information or themes emerged from data analysis, which was important for developing the framework of analysis detailed below, which followed the final stage of fieldwork undertaken during Visit Three.

**Research journal**

A research journal is a tool for promoting and understanding researcher development (Borg, 2001, p. 156). Janesick (1998, p. 3) views journal writing as ‘a tangible way to evaluate our experience, improve and clarify one’s thinking, and finally become a better…researcher’. Such journals can provide a platform for reflective writing by researchers who are working in Aboriginal communities, in a field of professional activity we know little about (Borg, 2001; Janesick, 1998).

Much has been written about the role that reflective writing, diaries and journals, play in professional growth, specifically for researchers (Bailey, 1990; Boxall, 1995; Borg 2001; Francis, 1995; Janesick, 1998; Hoover, 1994; Numrich, 1996). A form of reflection or ‘benign introspection’ is a process of looking inwards and thinking about how our own experiences have influenced our thinking. Thomas (1995) refers to this as a research journal. For researchers, reflexivity facilitates a critical attitude locating the impact of researcher context and subjectivity in project design, data collection and representation of findings (Gouldner, 2004). The reflective process fosters self-understanding, minimising bias which is crucial for undertaking qualitative research that is ethical. Reflective practices should be maintained throughout each stage of fieldwork by recording learning, observations and experiences in the journal (Furco, 1996).

Consistent use of a journal in indigenous centred research enables a level of self-interrogation supporting ‘post-colonial’ theory (Hawley, 2015). From the outset, the
researcher documented her behaviour and thoughts in a journal. In an ongoing process of reflection, the journal captured the ‘outsider’s’ responses to the circumstances (Borg, 2001). As the value of the journal became increasingly evident, it was recognised that it was, in fact, another source of data. The subjective insights and understandings, recorded in the journal, were analysed alongside the responses from participants gathered during each stage of data collection. Notions borrowed from auto-ethnography enabled the researcher to use her own behaviour and observations to understand different circumstances and experiences.

Reading one’s own writing when presented as if it were someone else’s text, in computer or printed characters, can be a powerful technique for abstracting oneself from the situation described. Journal entries read months after they were written performed this role\(^8\) to support the analysis of positionality, power imbalances, and significantly, bias that prioritised some data over other data for collection.

The research journal was also useful for identifying the evolution of the research process; what worked, what did not, and how the activities needed to be modified. It exposed misunderstandings and assumptions in the analysis of what was heard and seen (Smith, 1999). Reading through the journal itself offered a form of data analysis (Borg, 2001). Where appropriate, reflections have been included in the data chapters and cited as: ‘research journal’.

**Observation**

Observations of social phenomena facilitated through immersion are said to get close to reality and to reproduce truthful insights (McNeill, 1990). The participant observer gathers data by participating in the daily life of the group she studies, to see what situations the members ordinarily meet and how they behave in them (McNeill, 1990). Participant observation is thus not merely a method of conducting field research, but also a role that is used by the researcher (Burgess, 1982, p. 45) who has to remain detached from the group, while at the same time becoming a member of it (McNeill, 1990, p. 66). Participant observation is one of the most important data-generating techniques upon which ethnographers rely (Liampittong, 2009); however some researchers dismiss participant observation as not sufficiently objective, and as unscientific (Gouldner, 2004, p.383). In this view, detachment and objectivity are

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\(^8\) An observation suggested by Liddy Nevile in private communication on April 18, 2014.
seen as a barrier to understanding the real experience of subjects and prevent the ability to represent research findings.

For this study the researcher’s role as a ‘peripheral member researcher’ (Adler and Adler, 1987) positioned her as someone who was not fully immersed in the participants’ or the children’s lives, but actively immersed in the School context, which included staying at the School in the visitor accommodation area for extended periods during each stage of fieldwork. Observation arguably facilitates comparisons between stated and actual actions, and helps form inferences that interview data alone could not support (Endacott, 2005). The objective of observations in this research was to help understand the children’s circumstances and how aspects of their lives, both within and beyond the schooling context, informed their wellbeing. So the researcher recorded classroom activities, children’s behaviour, and interactions between staff and children and between staff themselves. The peripheral member researcher engaged with participants in the playground, in the classroom, on the buses, and out in the wider community. To minimise the ‘researcher effect’ (Sarankatos, 1999), most observations were not recorded in the presence of participants but immediately after the class, activities, or at the end of the day. This had implications for their accuracy. By the end of the day, intense moments had potentially been processed and the immediate thoughts, reactions and clarity of responses may have dissipated. Sometimes it was appropriate to immediately record observations on a mobile telephone. Members of staff were observed to be on their phones during class time, or on school bus runs, so it did not appear inappropriate for the researcher to use her phone at those times.

It was critical that teachers felt comfortable with the researcher’s presence and that they did not feel she disrupted their classroom routines. Observations captured the ‘everyday’ experience of teachers and students in their natural surroundings of the classrooms; but it was rarely just one teacher, an assistant and the children. Many visitors participate in classroom activities, which mean the presence of strangers has become normalised. An outsider’s active participation was thus not as much of a disruption for the children as might have been expected. The researcher kept notes of classroom events, children’s needs, challenges teachers encountered and strategies to overcome them.

The most valuable observations were made during classroom interactions. During Visit One, the researcher helped in the Year 2 class for two weeks. During Visit Two,
she helped the Year 3/4 class teacher. Following five days of intensive engagement, she requested permission from teachers to record observations. She informed them that observations would not focus on their teaching practice, but rather the support they provided to children to address specific needs as they arise. This facilitated the engagement process so she could develop an understanding of classroom routines and practices, quickly identifying opportunities where assistance could be provided.

Also recorded were hand written descriptions of children’s physical environments and the many interactions that took place with children outside the School. These interactions often exposed contradictory sides of a child’s personality. For example, children who were violent and disruptive at the School were friendly at the local swimming pool. The observations are cited as ‘Field note’ in the data chapters.

**Interviews**

Data gathering methods developed as the project progressed, consistent with a post-colonial research approach (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008). This emphasised the importance of centring the voices of Aboriginal participants. Recognising that many Aboriginal staff employed at the School are not native English speakers, it was essential that multiple strategies were employed to engage them in the study.

In the initial research proposal, comprehensive structured interviews were identified as the primary research tool. These, and semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Smith, 1999; Sarantakos, 1999), are often used to minimise power imbalances. Following the first visit, however, it was clear that strong positivist approaches focused on objectivity and detachment would not be possible. The interviewees were obviously not comfortable with direct questioning and their responses were often not clear and focussed.

The first teacher asked to complete an interview was one the researcher had helped most in the classroom. She suggested interviewing her teaching assistant instead of herself. It turned out it was common for teachers to nominate Aboriginal support staff to complete an interview in their place, saying that they would complete an interview at a later stage, but most teaching assistants were reluctant to be interviewed.

Over a two-week period, the remaining teaching staff were approached individually. Some were not included; due to the busyness of School staff it was a challenge to find an opportunity to speak directly with participants. In the final days of Visit Two, three
staff questioned why they had not been invited to complete an interview and a time was arranged for the interviews to be held.

Many Aboriginal participants appeared anxious and questioned the quality of information they could provide. They were re-assured that their responses would not be judged; that there were no ‘right or wrong’ answers to the questions posed. They were reminded they were not being researched themselves but were helping the researcher learn about the children.

In total, a set of 38 interviews that could be best described as ‘loosely-structured’ were completed over a three week period in August 2013 and a two week period in August 2014. Of those interviewed, 17 were Aboriginal and 21 were white teachers or assistant, administrative, professional or maintenance staff (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant role</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head of staff Employee who left school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Assistant Teachers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Culture Teachers (Elders)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom teachers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplain</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional service providers - (internal and external)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants were given the opportunity to review the interview schedule and were reminded that all responses were confidential and would remain anonymous. Handwritten notes recorded responses for analysis at a later stage. All white participants gave written consent for the recording of their interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were held in mutually agreed locations; usually in classrooms or in the visitor accommodation area.

To preserve anonymity, critical in a small research community, participants’ names were not associated with their contributions, but each participant was allocated a number.

Initially, two interview instruments were created in consultation with a supervisor and the School Principal; one for Aboriginal staff and one for others. This was quickly seen as inappropriate and inconsistent with the ethical foundations of the project. A modified single instrument was then developed to ensure all the questions would be inclusive, especially of staff who speak English as a second or third language with limited literacy.

In the early stages of the research it was not clear exactly how the story of the children could be told so the first interviews were, in a sense, ‘fishing’ exercises.

The interviews consisted of a set of general questions in an effort to support the ‘pyramid structure’ (Sarankatos, 1998): background questions to collect relevant information about staff roles and responsibilities and their employment. Participants were asked to describe what they knew about the children’s living situation. Later questions focused on the strategies staff were using to support the children’s needs. To identify what was working well, participants were asked to describe a ‘good’ day. Participants were asked to describe strategies they used to manage the challenges that arise in their roles, specifically regarding the children’s behaviour. Participants were also asked to describe a ‘bad’ day and how their ability to meet student needs could be strengthened.

Participants were asked to comment on recent government policies, specifically the Gonski Review and the subsequent Education Reform Bill, to gain insight into their perspective of the broader education context and frameworks in which they work. To identify a possible gap in knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal Education generally, teachers were asked to discuss anything they felt was missing from wider
social and political narratives about Aboriginal education and specifically the needs of Aboriginal students who attend remote schools.

**Wellbeing as an analysis tool**

Following the completion of Visit Two, interviews, observational recordings and journal entries were manually transcribed; this process took 10 months. The stages of data analysis included data reduction and organisation and iterative sampling, finally followed by interpretation. Theme identification during the data reduction and organisation stage involved coding and grouping word repetitions that were manually recorded and formally organised in an Excel spreadsheet. This thematic analysis was chosen for its capacity to ascertain the emerging central ideas and themes, used in the collection of qualitative data (Willis, 2010). Word repetitions were then categorised as ‘key words in context’ which enabled deeper understanding of a concept by looking at how it is used (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.3). Themes were finalised by sorting examples into primary categories: physical, social, emotional and cultural. Sub-themes were then organised following in-depth, line by line scrutiny (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) of each transcript, around each major theme. Indigenous categories were integrated as sub-themes; the researcher looked for local terms that would have remained unfamiliar if she had not utilised an immersion strategy as part of the ethnographic approach. Over time, the researcher understood the inherent meanings of context-specific local Aboriginal words and kinship terms such as ‘humbugging’; shame’; ‘payback’;’ deadly’; ‘gammon’; ‘strong’ and ‘mother’.

In further efforts to interpret the data, the researcher developed a framework of wellbeing, a feature central to the National Aboriginal Health Strategy of 1989. A final stage of ‘coding’ the data with reference to wellbeing was undertaken, and the major themes were structured through application of the wellbeing framework that incorporated four dimensions of wellbeing - physical, social, emotional and cultural, as outlined by the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, 1989). In the final stage of data analysis, following Visit Three, the researcher sought to identify the specific problems facing a particular cohort of Aboriginal children through the lens of wellbeing. Continuing reading of published research helped in the exploration of the relationship between the data (O’Leary, 2007) and aspects of wellbeing. In-depth information about the children’s lives emerged.
The wellbeing framework became central both to the theoretical component of the research and to the findings as it became increasingly clear that the lives of children needed to be understood with qualitative research that enabled a holistic interpretation of their needs. The chosen approach was thus to investigate wellbeing.

References to health and wellbeing in relation to Indigenous notions of wellbeing were incorporated into the data analysis sections, to align with the ‘decolonial’ goals of this research. In an attempt to avoid fixation on simplistic anti-colonial goals of challenging Western knowledge and wellbeing practices, the researcher thoroughly reviewed, critiqued and incorporated Indigenous notions of wellbeing as the post-colonial lens of analysis.

**Triangulation of data**

Immersion and prolonged field work, the triangulation of data sources, and rich and thick descriptions, assist in ensuring that the data is reliable and complete (Liamputtong, 2009; Pelto, 2016; 2017). Triangulation of data was supported by the various data collection techniques used: interviews were supported or otherwise by observations; early and more recent journal records were compared with interviews, observations and all were considered in the light of recent research particularly about the lives of Aboriginal children in general, but also other children. Analysis of the data quickly revealed that it was not a matter of just matching one person’s response to those of other participants, but rather being able to see quickly what was contributed by those who best know and understand the circumstances of Aboriginal people in the relevant and related contexts. These people’s comments were frequently insightful in ways that those of outsiders could not be. It became clear that it would not be necessary to identify which participant had contributed which statement, but rather if the person identified as Aboriginal or not. For this reason, and to give priority to the contributions of Indigenous participants, they are identified as such throughout the thesis.

**Discussion of methods**

Particular limitations pertaining to the development of descriptions based on School staff perceptions were overcome through utilisation of multiple research methods, capturing information using different techniques, and from those who had contact with the children in various settings. Many Aboriginal members of staff are part of the children’s social networks, and some are members of the children’s immediate
families. These staff had direct insight into the children’s lives beyond the School setting.

The more the researcher engaged in School functioning and became familiar with the routines of the staff, the more she was able to identify opportunities to invite participants to engage in interviews, particularly when they were less busy and more likely to respond positively to participation requests. It was anticipated that approaching staff individually would increase participation rates. Approaching staff individually, however, proved to be incredibly time consuming and stressful.

Some interviews were interrupted by School executives. The one-to-one interviews often occurred in classrooms, and on occasion executives walked past, and while they did not overhear what was being said, some staff expressed feelings of discomfort at seeing them. At times, Aboriginal staff and specifically Language and Culture teachers had implied that they could not talk openly with the ‘white bosses around’ (Research Journal, 19 July, 2012). They were given the option to complete the interviews in the visitor accommodation area to avoid distraction or disruption but many declined and terminated the interview.

For others, there was complete disclosure as participants seemed to use the interview time as an opportunity to express their grievances, seeking guidance and support from the researcher about the numerous and complex challenges they face working at the School. This meant the researcher frequently had to reaffirm the boundaries inherent in her role.

It is a common evolution in the interview process that interviews take the form of a conversation (Smith, 2008). This was more evident with the participants with whom the researcher had developed the strongest rapport. This was appreciated and she worked to build rapport with more participants. There were times when the ‘conversations’ got off topic and digressed into the personal realm. Then the researcher felt a need to ‘guide’ the conversations, mindful of the need to allow flexibility so as not to control the responses or anticipate disclosures (Tomaselli et al., 2008). Achieving this balance was not easy.

The researcher was sometimes perceived by staff as a counsellor, which risked compromising her role and confusion between being a participant’s ‘trusted friend’ and just another instrument of the dominant authority to be used (Research Journal, 18 July 2012). She had to navigate the intimacy of those who wanted to speak, being
acutely aware of the problems of trying to balance conflicting roles. While a particular person might welcome her as a classroom assistant, the same person would be less interested when she was acting as a researcher (Research Journal, 20 July 2012). For some participants, support from the Principal would only have been possible if there was a connection between the researcher and the Principal, so there was a temptation to try to ‘curry favour’ with the Principal via the researcher. Similarly, there were attempts to off-load complaints to the researcher (Research Journal, 20 July 2013).

The participants often described aspects of their personal circumstances that were consistent in their mind with those of the children. This meant the researcher had to ask why were participants telling her this? Was she someone they could dump on? This awareness alerted her to the need to question the importance or otherwise of what she was being told, to be alert to why the person was revealing whatever, and how she might be responding to their vulnerability.

The level of disclosure was at times alarming; sometimes including information about sexual abuse, violence and alcoholism. Later, there was a concern that over-disclosure may have placed participants in an awkward position. The disclosures were not random; participants described aspects of their personal circumstances that they said were consistent with what many of the children experienced. Due to the intensity of interviews, the researcher could not complete more than three interviews on any given day. This added pressure to an already tight timeframe for the interviews.

Concerns persisted regarding whether culturally sensitive techniques could alleviate power imbalances. The power imbalances are engrained in the mannerisms of individuals, and it was questioned whether Aboriginal staff would actually feel comfortable to refuse participation or respond to the interview questions freely. Some Aboriginal participants were overly concerned about saying the ‘wrong thing’, perhaps indicating a lack of confidence in their responses, in the research process or some combination of the two. Classroom teachers and administrative staff responded to questions with confidence and a sense of certainty; their behaviour and general tone indicated teachers and executive staff, specifically, were not concerned that the research would discredit or challenge their responses. Some participants required extra work from the researcher to gain their trust, but no researcher can always accept at face value what people say, bearing in mind that they might not trust her.
For a researcher in an isolated location, inclusion in the form of invitations was confusing. Many significant matters from the research perspective were discussed in informal ‘yarning’ sessions, often involving exchanges of parental chatter about children, including those of the researcher and the research participants. Such events clearly contributed to the researcher’s capacity to follow the Council’s Elders who had said they would like her to ‘tell it how it is’ (Research Journal, 19 July 2012) but they probably would not have occurred in other circumstances.

Participating in the research for this thesis was just another interference in a busy School schedule and some staff were already resentful of time spent with the many visitors to the School, so it was clear there would be little cooperation with the researcher unless it was seen by the staff that she interrupted that she made their life easier.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the methodological approach, the ethical complexity of working at the research site, and the methods used in the research setting. The combination of the post-colonial lens of analysis with self-consciousness means that this thesis presents what School staff contributed, as well as the researcher’s own insights, and how it has shaped her approach to the research process and views of the children’s circumstances. The rich combination of Aboriginal voices, observational recordings and the researcher’s process of critical reflexivity are intended to both present a deeper understanding of the children’s lives than is typically presented in current scholarly literature in the disciplines of education, sociology, anthropology and psychology, and to expose the way in which the researchers’ worldviews shape their research design and analysis. Such an approach enables the researcher to assess whether the research process and procedures allow the participants to communicate their experiences from their individual frame of reference.

The next three chapters take a different direction. They present and analyse data concerning the children’s wellbeing.
Chapter 4: Physical Wellbeing

Introduction

The thesis, as a post-colonial work, has the goal of collecting and considering the data from a post-colonial perspective. That is, prioritising how those who have been colonised understand their world. This position is adopted instead of the more common perspective that would collect and consider data using a methodology informed by colonial views, a perspective of the dominators rather than the dominated. In the event, the data were collected both from those from the colonising world and those colonised but, in fact, these were not two distinct groups of contributors. Many of the Aboriginal people involved have been educated by the colonisers and their views are at least influenced by colonial perspectives. The job of the post-colonial researcher is first to obtain relevant data and then to analyse it from the appropriate perspective.

Iterative sampling of the available data led the researcher to adopt a framework based on a broad notion of wellbeing. As shown earlier, the wellbeing of Aboriginal children is of concern to state and national governments and it directly affects their capacity to participate in schooling. A child’s preparedness for schooling depends on their school being prepared for them, their families being ready and able to support them, and the child itself being ready. The dimensions of wellbeing of a child can reveal critical information about their preparedness for schooling and it is this that ultimately determines the effectiveness of their participation in school.

The first dimension of wellbeing, considered in this chapter, is physical wellbeing. Physical wellbeing is not simply about physical conditions such as material circumstances, or personal health, but does include both.

In this and the next two chapters, the data contributed in interviews and observations are presented in the form of quotations. They are presented to allow the reader to hear the voice of the interviewee directly. Not all contributions are narrated as many speak for themselves. Included in the data are descriptions of the children’s circumstances that are deliberately presented as offered by the research participants, to give preference to their descriptions. It should be remembered that the data have informed the researcher and the thesis aims to enable the reader to vicariously experience what
is offered. The quotations are, where appropriate, identified as contributions of Aboriginal people but otherwise not significantly identified.

**Living Conditions**

The children’s living conditions emerged as a consistent factor in their wellbeing and were described in relation to housing, access to resources such as clothing, and lifestyles which had implications for children’s physical wellbeing.

**Housing**

All of our kids live in town or bush camps. The living conditions are terrible - I would say most live in extreme poverty… it’s not third world; we are talking fourth world conditions (Participant 16).

Kids can’t even have a hot shower at home. There’s no hot water. No sewerage. Most of the houses don’t even have functional kitchens (Participant 8).

An Aboriginal participant explained:

Many kids don’t even have a proper home where they can feel comfortable to shower or have a bed that is their own. They just move around all the time (Participant 33).

Overcrowding has been said to place incredible pressure on Aboriginal families and communities and strain the already limited household resources (SCRGSP, 2014; ABS, 2016a). Some participant staff said, however, that living in groups increases access to resources. Some said the necessary co-sleeping arrangements in crowded houses are consistent with traditional cultural practice and are not due to limited resources.

**Clothing**

The School is in an arid desert region where daily temperatures can range from -2.0 degrees Celsius on winter mornings up to 46 degrees on summer days. From the perspective of non-Aboriginal staff:

So many kids come to school in winter wearing only shorts and a t-shirt and no shoes even. I spend so much time hunting through the donations to find the right sizes of clothes for kids who are uncomfortable, like they can’t sit still or whinge cause they are cold (Participant 2).

One of the benefits of attracting high numbers of visitors to the School is that:

The visitors often leave donations of clothing and other items which are essential for clothing children who arrive at school inappropriately dressed (Participant 16).
Being cold is obviously not positive wellbeing. Staff find appropriate clothing for the children in the piles of donated items stored in a ship container on School grounds. Clean clothing is also given to children who arrive at school in dirty clothes; sometimes the assistant teachers wash the children’s clothes and re-dress them in their own clothing before the end of the school day.

**Lifestyle**

While the children’s health might be affected by their living conditions, in other contexts, such as the streets of India, children override physical disadvantages and suffer chronic and residual health issues without loss of social and emotional wellbeing (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2006; Triandis, 2000). Living conditions are thus subject to life styles.

[Aboriginal] Lifestyles weaken the ability of families to maintain their homes and cultivate adequate conditions that promote care of themselves and their children. (Participant 3)

They don’t work but they don’t look after their homes. They just sit around playing bingo and drinking all day. The houses are all filthy and it’s no wonder the kids come in looking dirty and sick all the time. (Participant 10).

The families simply don’t implement routines that are necessary for children to maintain good levels of hygiene and physical health, like having a shower each day and brushing their teeth regularly (Participant 14).

Children just don’t know how to protect themselves. …the lack of boundaries means it is so easy for them to pick up any illness that may be going around their families and within their communities… it also means the kids get injured really easy and sometimes they come to school and we just have to deal with it (Participant 15).

Many white participants blamed the families for failing to maintain their homes but, as noted in Chapter 2, the Northern Territory Government has awarded the maintenance of housing to a private contractor, so families are not permitted to repair the houses.

Many children live in bush camps a long way from the School, some up to 100 km away. This means that most children who do go to school spend a considerable time travelling in buses, often before having any breakfast.

Because in winter, it can be cold at night and hot during the day, Aboriginal people often sleep outside during the day and sit by fires at night. This life style means that many children are tired or asleep during the school day.

A teacher contributed her daily concerns:
Did ‘xxx’ get any sleep? Did he have a shower, did he get fed, and was the family drunk? Were there lots of fights? Has his brother just gone to jail? These are all things I need to consider and also which would not be happening for kids in other schools (Participant 4).

Some teachers made a connection between chronic exhaustion and illnesses, implying the children are tired all the time because they are fighting off sickness. Some said the tiredness is simply related to the children’s living circumstances. As indicated later, there is some confusion and disagreement among participants about illness.

**Two perspectives**

The living conditions of the children were described from what appeared to be different perspectives. One might have expected these to be simply the western and the Aboriginal perspectives but they seemed to fall more into the categories of acceptance and rejection (post-colonial and the neo-colonial perspectives).

Some staff who were not Aboriginal described the living conditions of many children as characterised by overcrowding, inadequate water and washing facilities, poor sewage disposal and food preparation facilities. Aboriginal participants attributed the views of these white teachers to ignorance:

> It’s some of my families live in town camps—they are well-dressed, they are showered, they are fed, and they have got everything they want. That’s not poverty. You need to spend a week on town camps to know what these kids’ lives are like. The white fellas don’t know what they are talking about when they talk about the camps. They have never been in one (Participant 15).

One teacher indirectly questioned the continuing dominance of ‘colonial’ ways:

> Aboriginal people do have a routine but we [the School] cut across that significantly. I find it difficult to say that parents should disregard what they are doing to suit the school. How we structure our day is not even common to the ‘white world’. 9 am is not a convenient start time for kids who live 100 kms away from school (Participant 9).

**Health and hygiene**

Teachers commented on the relationship between children’s living conditions and their health outcomes. In most schools, teachers support children’s wellbeing and keep a watchful eye on them for health issues that might need attention. Many teachers at the School saw the children’s chronic poor health as yet another thing for which they had somehow to take responsibility when children’s families failed them.

> The school attempts to be a one-stop shop where we deal with everything from healing, sores, nutrition and often, then it’s education (Participant 24).
But managing hygiene problems while trying to teach a class is not easy:

It was a student I know who was particularly unclean and had horrendous body odour. I thought to ask the class if there were any students that wanted to have a shower, rather than single this particular student out. The girl put her hand up and I felt relieved. After the TA showered her and found her clean clothes to wear, the change was instantly observable. I noticed an immediate improvement in her confidence as she quickly made attempts to participate in an activity with her classmates (Participant 11).

The interview data were consistent with what is widely known; many Aboriginal children suffer skin infections—bacterial, viral, fungal and parasitic. The data support findings of earlier research undertaken by Currie and Carapetis (2000) who showed that in remote Aboriginal communities, skin infections have been normalised, are consequently underreported, and their prevalence is now considered ‘hyper-endemic’.

What is known as ‘modern nomadicity’ (Haber, 2015), is noted here as an obvious issue for the sustained treatment of the children’s medical and mental conditions by staff at the School.

They are just not keeping themselves clean. Not staying clean means they are more likely to suffer from health problems, like boils, that are extremely painful yet easily treated by showering regularly and maintaining a reasonable level of bodily cleanliness (Participant 7).

Observational data recorded in a journal by the researcher support this:

During Visit Two, children were observed scratching, picking at sores, pulling nits from their hair. (Field note, 21 July 2013).

While reading a story about pirates, I asked the pre-school kids if they had any gaps in their teeth. I had expected many to have lost baby teeth, but when they opened their mouths I saw cavities so large I could have fit my little finger inside. I had never seen such rotten teeth in children of such young ages (Field note, 21 July 2012).

I observed many children with missing fingernails. When I investigated the cause many teachers said the children lose their nails because of a fungal infection which can easily be treated (Field note, 15 August 2012).

Teachers attributed some of the problems associated with lack of concentration in the classroom to health problems:

When the kids are uncomfortable, they are not able to learn effectively and sometimes physical problems cause them to get really distressed emotionally. Sometimes the health problems stop them from coming (Participant 7).

Kids come to school in total distress, they have a really bad case of scabies or head lice… they have so many they fall on the desks while they are working (Participant 2).
Significantly, teachers identified a knowledge gap in children with respect to hygiene:

They don’t have the knowledge about basic hygiene routines (Participant 11).

I get them to blow their noses, but so many of them can’t even blow their noses properly. … it’s hard because so many of them have older grandparents taking care of them and they have not been taught about health and hygiene. The houses are absolutely filthy and this causes the spread of germs (Participant 2).

**Chronic health-related problems**

Deafness was identified as another significant issue among the children.

The kids here suffer conditions that you just don’t see in other communities… we have kids here that are completely deaf and so many that have significant hearing loss. Most of it is preventable but they will now be affected for the rest of their lives (Participant 18).

We have spent thousands on infrastructure in some of the classrooms - like installing speaker systems and addressing problems with reverberations to support children who have conductive hearing loss (Participant 16).

The School has special caps with hearing aids embedded:

I organise the hats for them but it’s up to individual teachers to make sure they wear them and many of the kids refuse (Participant 5).

We encourage children who are meant to wear them throughout the school day. They hate them though, and the problem is that there is no follow up support at home. We can’t let the children take the hats home or they [the hats] will not come back (Participant 18).

Deafness is considered one of the most isolating sensory deprivations AIHW, 2011c). Children who cannot hear cannot participate easily with their peers.

Trachoma is another serious chronic illness suffered by many of the children.

We teach the kids about the bacteria that cause the disease and how it can be spread by both direct and indirect contact (Participant 12).

Parents will not take their children to [eye] specialist appointments or explore treatment options so this becomes a huge component of my role (Participant 5).

These data show that there is a complex combination of factors relating to individual, home and community life experiences that can affect a child’s health and overall physical wellbeing that also has consequences for a child’s ability to engage in school.

Many children attending the School live in a combination of conditions that have adverse effects on their capacity to effectively maintain health and hygiene routines,
which leads to physical ailments that make it difficult to engage in school and classroom activities.

**Nutrition**

Many children were identified as suffering from poor nutrition. Families’ chosen life styles are subject to challenging conditions: many are unemployed, many live a long way from shopping centres, many do not have their own means of transport, and many do not have the knowledge necessary or desire to eat healthily. It is not common practice for their carers to supplement their diet with home-grown fruit and vegetables, probably because that is doable but not easy in the region, and traditional foods are not usually on the menu either.

Families use the school bus runs as a way of getting to and from town. It just makes it easier for them to do their shopping. Otherwise, some of them are totally isolated and have no way of getting into town. Many families live where they do because they were sanctioned to Aboriginal reserves (Participant 16).

The School supports the use of the school bus service for families needing transport to the central business district and explained that for many, this was the only way to shop for food and clothing.

An Aboriginal teaching assistant shared her experience:

> I know what these kids are like. We had a whole lot of kids and mum was a single mum on a pension and we had to buy food for two weeks. And if we ran out of food we had to wait until pension day. We would be starving, literally starving (Participant 15).

> I think fresh food is just too expensive out here so the families are just not buying it (Participant 14).

The television personality Costa Georgiadis has visited the School several times to show the children how to use ‘wicking boxes’ to grow their own fresh produce at home. Using the techniques is difficult and it is unlikely people in bush camps would be attracted to the challenge.

> We try and teach the kids how to grow fresh food at school in the kitchen garden. We even have local volunteers who come in and help…I’ve seen these same volunteers set up gardens in town camps but they are not maintained. I don’t think the kids or their families really know how to grow anything (Participant 7).

Teachers said that many children eat traditional food when there is a food shortage in their homes, but there was little evidence of this. An Aboriginal teacher explained:
We would do that. We would go out fishing when we ran out of food. I know what it’s like for these kids to be hungry … but there is no water around here for them to go fishing (Participant 18).

Similarly, the bush camps are not always in areas populated by wildlife that can be hunted, even if there are still people skilled in such activities. That traditional hunting and gathering are no longer common practice was evidenced by the School’s efforts to introduce the children to these activities by organising Elders to teach the skills and demonstrate the practices on special cultural outings. Similarly, the School evidenced the need for horticultural lessons and experience when it organised local volunteers and Costa to work with the children.

Aboriginal staff who professed to not relating to the children’s circumstances because they ‘didn’t grow up like them’ were critical of many parents and carers:

They don’t look after their kids, they drink too much and they neglect to feed their kids (Participant 22).

The School canteen provides a hot breakfast and lunch and fruit snacks at recesses for the children. Non-government organisations, including the Red Cross, have helped the School by donating food and their volunteers have worked with the School’s canteen manager to prepare and serve meals to the children.

Many non-Aboriginal staff said the food runs are a great contribution; expressing positive views about the Principal who gives up every Sunday afternoon to deliver meals to children and their families. Initially, I too felt deeply moved by his efforts. While on the food runs, children would run towards us, eager to collect food. Bananas were most sought after - the high costs of fresh produce make them out of reach for many (Field note, July 19, 2012).

An assistant teacher described details of children’s behaviour to substantiate her view that children want to eat healthy food but do not have access to it at home:

We have two kids from one of the biggest families I know… they will grab at the fruit and shove it down their pants and grab heaps. And they were still grabbing heaps of food and eating quickly and you are sort of, … like, … “Chew slowly and you will get another fruit” (Participant 6).

The canteen manager has increasingly added healthy foods to the menu.

At first they wouldn’t eat salad or vegetables. We used to hide them in different dishes. Now kids come up and ask for second serves of salad and vegetables (Participant 16).

Many participants said that children arrive at the School in the mornings not having eaten since lunchtime the day before; some expressed concern that many children will
not have food over the weekend. Concerns were also raised about extended periods, especially the school holidays. The School canteen prepares and freezes extra meals during the week, which are delivered by the Principal to some communities during weekends and the school holidays.

It seems that the children who attend the School, and thus qualify for the food-runs on other days, are actually eating relatively well. One Elder noted:

Food program is good. A lot of kids can’t get food at home (Participant 34).

Another Elder argued this was necessary to counter neglect:

Kids have a breakfast here and lunch… it’s really good because, like, some parents, they’re too lazy to cook for the kids… they don’t take proper care of em’ (Participant 31).

Some staff said that lack of food is not the reality for many children but the range of food in children’s homes is limited by the poor food choices of parents and families. It is likely that, as elsewhere, the food parents and families consume is processed and has a high fat and sugar content. Staff also said that children make unhealthy choices buying food with money given to them by their families. Staff connected the prevalence of sickness and disease in many of the children to their overconsumption of foods low in nutritional value. Unhealthy dietary habits were also coupled with a lack of physical activity.

Not everyone was pleased by the food the School offers, and some questioned the quality. Other than the canteen manager, none of the participants seemed to have professional expertise in dietary matters but a number of the teachers, who compared to others live very privileged lives, did not buy even the subsidised meals at the School, with one noting:

The food program is absolute crap. The food they serve here is actually not healthy. It’s full of preservatives and highly processed stuff. I can tell you now, there is no way I would eat it (Participant 7).

These judgments were not substantiated and were not confirmed by observation, as the journal notes record observation of children happily eating a range of meals put together using fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat.

**The School’s role**

The School itself, directed by the Council of Aboriginal Elders, works hard to promote the children’s health through its meals programs. Dedicating a high proportion of its funding to the provision of good, regular meals, it is demonstrating
the Elders’ concern for the wellbeing of the children. Whether or not this is the best strategy for solving the problems associated with poor diets in the long term, at least the children involved immediately benefit from access to a reasonably stable supply of good food in the short term.

What is interesting, however, is the suspicion with which this practice is regarded by some staff.

One participant directly questioned the Principal’s motives:

> I don’t trust what he’s doing. He goes into the camps to deliver meals like some big white hero and I actually think he’s just spying on the kids families. It’s an intrusion and he shouldn’t be doing it (Participant 17)

**Substance abuse**

Substance abuse was reported as a significant factor affecting the wellbeing of many of the children.

> Kids as young as 10 are taking drugs and drinking and most of these kids don’t attend regularly so they miss out on the meals provided by the School (Participant 9).

The substances most commonly identified by participants were alcohol and marijuana. Participants argued that there was a high risk of maltreatment of children whose parents and family members misuse substances.

> Many of the families give their kids money to buy food but the kids use this money to buy drugs and alcohol (Participant 25).

> A lot of the kids come from total chaos, drunkenness, drug taking. This means that they don’t buy food and other essentials (Participant 24).

An Aboriginal staff member commented on children’s vulnerability to sexual abuse when substance abuse is prevalent in families:

> Most of them brought up with alcohol problems, sexual abuse, they were really scared (Participant 23).

The intergenerational effects of substance abuse were seen to be associated with the choices children were making about their own drug and alcohol use. Aboriginal participants, in particular, worried about this:

> So many of these kids are taking drugs. ... Often children just have no idea about how harmful these substances actually are (Participant 24).

A long-term employed teacher said she talked openly with her students about drugs and alcohol:
I facilitated a lesson on the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol and how these substances actually impact on the body. The kids in my class were totally shocked - they had no idea how harmful these substances were to them. The kids were telling me lots of stories about their families, who drinks, and they started to say things like ‘I’m not going to drink’. Whereas before it was like they never questioned it - drinking was just something that everybody did. It became normalised without an understanding of how harmful it can be (Participant 1).

A teacher described an incident when a child arrived at the School complaining of sore feet, and was found to have shards of glass in her feet. The teacher assumed that the child had walked on a broken bottle in the town camp as she had noticed rubbish and broken bottles on the ground outside the child’s home. Presumably this was evidence of undisciplined drinking and the ‘harrowing’ life experiences of Aboriginal children, but perhaps an example of ‘racially coded language’ (Burns & Williams, 2015).

Overall, participants were concerned about the prevalence of drug and alcohol misuse and sometimes reported physical abuse in many of the children’s homes. The children of substance-abusing parents are more likely to show faster acceleration in substance use patterns, and higher rates of alcohol and drug use disorders. Given the lack of understanding of the harmful effects of alcohol and drug use, some thought teaching the children the risks would lead to better choices in the future, independent of what was happening in their families. The opinions expressed were mostly consistent with stereotypical neo-colonial descriptions of town-camp Aboriginal people. (It was outside the scope of this research to investigate substance abuse in detail.)

**Exercise**

The School engages the children in structured physical activities, usually facilitated by classroom teachers and has generous outside play time supervised by staff.

No one really goes out and plays with these kids, like no one would run around and play a game with them or take them to sport on a weekend. That’s why we take them. Sometimes we organize the kids to go to Saturday sports competitions and also some afternoons after school (Participant 9).

The School swimming pool was built as a priority by the Elders of the School Council, demonstrating a concern for both the cleanliness and the physical exercise of the children. It was a success:

Swimming in summer really helps to keep the sickness under control (Participant 22).
In summer it’s much easier because the kids swim in the pool every day. They don’t get sick as much because they are cleaner (Participant 10).

Swimming lessons are held on Saturday mornings in addition to alternative opportunities for physical activity… interested children are collected from their homes and taken to weekend sporting activities, facilitated by wider community organisations (Participant 38).

Children need to know where and how they can play without equipment or resources which are also a form of exercise as it is highly unlikely that any children would own a bike or even a soccer ball (Participant 38).

Participants did not think the children have much exercise at home. Some staff went so far as to offer themselves as role models:

I walk or ride my bike to school so the children can see me being physically active. I also get in the pool with them and swim during summer (Participant 16).

**Health standards**

A significant difference in personal standards of health and understanding of healthy life was displayed by the various staff at the School. The researcher observed:

It made me contemplate what the baseline for health is. Obviously it is different for kids who are from more mainstream urban environments - if [my son] or one of his friends arrived at school in the state that many of these kids arrive here, I have no doubt that reports would be made immediately to the Department of Family and Community services (Field note, 14 August 2014).

Others saw it differently:

It’s like they don’t even understand that it’s abnormal for fingernails to just fall off. I take time out to explain that the nails actually fall off because of a fungal infection, they have bugs under them. I tell the students that the bugs can be killed with ointment that the school nurse can apply or families can get the ointment from doctors at Congress. The ointment is so cheap, but families don’t buy it. It’s neglect in my view (Participant 4).

One participant stated:

Families don’t keep children home when they are sick – there doesn’t seem to be an understanding of how disease can be passed on and this is why us teachers are so sick all the time. I am often sick and over the last few years, I have been absent for more than two school terms. I am always picking up things from these kids. They come to school so sick; it’s just a waiting game really. The next bout of sickness is always just around the corner (Participant 7).

but this was contradicted by another participant:
Children don’t look well, but they can’t really be sick because I haven’t caught anything from them and I have a lot of close contact with them (Participant 38).

So, who decides the need for intervention and when?

I went on an excursion with the Transition class and noticed the majority of kids had runny noses and a build-up of congestion showing symptoms of having a cold or common flu. When I queried the class teacher, [she] said “a lot of kids aren’t actually sick - even though they suffer chronic congestion problems and snotty noses. Many of them are actually suffering food intolerances to things in a western diet like we do. Culturally they have absolutely no understanding about intolerances”.

I contemplated my view of health and especially what children, generally and specifically here at the School, need to achieve to be healthy. To me, many of the children appeared very sick; many had rotten teeth, a build-up of ear wax easily observed, in addition to knotted hair infested with lice. Fingernails lost to infection and tiny cuts on dry hands were observed to be a marker of dehydration. How could one possibly declare that the children are not sick? (Field note, 12 August 2014).

If a kid has copious amounts of mucus coming out of them, you would want to get to the bottom of it right? But out here it’s not sick, they just treat the symptoms without consideration of the causes and I think more needs to be done (Participant 18).

When families try to manage illness, they often have problems:

I heard about families using bush herbs to treat really chronic infections and it just doesn’t work (Participant 11).

Families need to understand that most illnesses have been introduced post colonisation and it is for this reason that not all illnesses can be treated [using traditional methods] (Participant 20).

They don’t identify the symptoms, they just put up with things that we never would (Participant 9).

Children are not taken to hospital or to seek medical treatment by their families… sometimes this means simply walking 100 meters to the health centre in their town camp (Participant 6).

Among the staff there is little agreement about what to do, how to do it, or why it might be done. This means that too often health issues do not get consistent and effective treatment and so treatments are seen to not work.

Health education

The staff at the School do their best to help with the children’s health education:

Structured class time is dedicated to teaching children about certain food groups and specifically types of food that should be consumed most often,
and those which should only be consumed occasionally, as part of a balanced diet (Participant 7).

I have regular cooking classes with my kids; sometimes we go into the kitchen and work with the secondary kids. I also teach them how to make healthy food choices. Some of them have no idea about really basic things, like how eating too much sugar will rot your teeth (Participant 12).

Sadly, it is not what is ‘taught’ but what is ‘learned’ and then practised that matters. The teaching and other staff are not specialists in health or teaching about it but it is part of the NT syllabus.

A non-Aboriginal classroom teacher commented:

A child’s ability to find bush food can for some children mean the difference between whether they will eat or not: it’s that serious (Participant 14).

An Elder explained:

We take them out bush and they show me how to look for bush tucker. They know, them kids, how to get their own food when they’re not given any (Participant 6).

and an Aboriginal teaching assistant added:

… it’s not just about teaching culture, its survival (Participant 22).

For all the effort to teach about food there is apparently little change in practice. There are many complex issues affecting the children’s eating, not the least being that children are not in control of the necessary resources. The expertise available is also questionable. Where obesity is prevalent and many of the same issues pertain to staff as to children, it is hard to know how much is taught explicitly, and what is learned implicitly from the ‘hidden’ curriculum.

Teaching about hygiene practices is also considered important. An Aboriginal staff member explained:

The children just don’t understand the importance of doing things like washing their hands, cleaning their teeth, so we try and teach them at school (Participant 16).

Learning to live with disabilities in a community where the incidence is higher than usual is also important. To support children with conductive hearing loss, many teachers have learnt sign language, as part of School-funded professional development. All children at the School have been taught to sign the School song, promoting inclusivity.
Hygienic behaviour is treated as explicit curriculum at the School. This implies both that many Aboriginal children do not learn basic hygiene at home and that the teachers consider it necessary, so this requires taking time out of the academic schedule to devote to basic life skills.

Teaching students skills and strategies that promote physical health gives students an increased chance that they will continue to do these things when they leave school (Participant 18).

They might be able to teach their own kids to brush their teeth, but not have understood the need for healthy eating and how diet is related to poor teeth. This would still be progress in my view (Participant 24).

Staff roles
So far, this Chapter has been presenting the data collected about the children. Now the focus turns to a discussion of the opinions, attitudes and responsibilities of the School and the staff. In particular, the post-colonial perspective is shown to be at odds with some neo-colonial contributions from staff. The challenge for this thesis is to extricate authentic post-colonial views of the children’s wellbeing bearing in mind that Aboriginal culture and practices have changed over time and are no longer as they may have been pre-colonisation.

Responsibility
There are always many challenges involved in managing a school—in this case the Principal is ‘constantly battling for funds’, describing a ‘resource scramble’ as the School attempts to connect children with the services they need. Professional turnover also affects continuity of care.

They [the children] rely on us to treat their sickness… it takes up so much time but we have to do it. The kids come to us in distress and ask for help so what else can we do? (Participant 33).

An Aboriginal teacher said:

Many families send their kids on the school bus sick because they know the school nurse will treat them or they will be taken to Congress9 (Participant 18).

Attending to health problems requires funds, skill and significant time. For the School, this means teachers’ precious teaching time:

9 Congress is a primary health care service that has provided culturally appropriate support and advocacy for Aboriginal people in the Central Desert Region for over 40 years.
Most children are suffering from at least one of numerous physical ailments and we can’t treat them all but we try (Participant 3).

It’s not even about treating the head lice; we don’t even have the funds to buy head lice cream. Really it’s just about helping the kids to feel more comfortable (Participant 4).

The kids have so many sores, rashes and wounds. Clearly they need to be treated but we are just not doing anything to address the cause of the infections - we just get them to shower, wash their hair in shampoo and pull out the nits. We give them a change their clothes and it’s not enough of a response if you ask me (Participant 18).

Some of the kids will come and ask for a shower and then you take them and give them soap and they don’t know what to do (Participant 7).

**Limits of responsibility**

The views of participants showed, above all, that there was not a shared opinion about the situation. One teacher said:

Complete health is unrealistic. Because of everything that is going on here we need to be realistic about what we can achieve (Participant 38).

An Aboriginal staff member said:

The children have so many problems but often by the time they start school it’s too late to really help them. Many suffer hearing loss and other chronic conditions and all we can really do is treat the symptoms. I think it’s hard to step back and not take on responsibility even though it shouldn’t be up to us (Participant 9).

I think the school has to stop. While we are nurturing education and nutrition, we need to stop taking the responsibility out of the parents’ hands and let them do it. At the end of the day, they can’t expect everyone to rally around their kids without any support; they need to step up as well. We should stop feeding the kids, then the parents might step up and start taking care of them (Participant 15).

and some Aboriginal staff questioned aspects of the food program:

Aboriginal families are so used to handouts but it’s a set up. They wait for the meals and they don’t feed their kids because they know we will (Participant 36).

Not running around after families—they got to step up but it’s the balance, fine line. Help them but not giving food handouts, especially not delivering food into the camps like some big white hero (Participant 15).

The researcher observed:

I found the judgements by Aboriginal staff about the lack of responsibility of families very confronting. What I heard replicated the anti-welfare/dependency mentality. These views highlighted the extent to which
school staff has been enculturated into the dominant cultural mainstream… or are they reclaiming power, changing focus away from welfare dependency? (Field note, 5 August 2014)

With respect to parental responsibility:

It’s really hard to know when our roles and responsibilities as teachers start and end. When should greater accountability be placed in the hands of parents and families? I just don’t think we should be doing all these things for the kids …like cooking, washing clothes, and showering their children (Participant 14).

Staff identified competing interests in family obligations as a challenge for the children’s wellbeing. One Aboriginal person said:

It’s very hard for me cause on payday my sons come around ‘humbugging’¹⁰ and like I have to give them my money and I’m taking care of them kids. Like, they just don’t care that I’m looking after their kids and the kids they suffer (Participant 33).

We need to engage the families so we can gain further insight into what is actually going on for these kids at home but it’s very hard to connect with them, to bring them in is a significant challenge because many don’t speak English well and they just lack confidence talking to us (Participant 16).

We don’t really involve the parents, we just treat the kids ourselves or nothing would get done… but the thing is, the more we do the more hopeless the families feel (Participant 11).

It seems there is a new neo-colonial perspective being adopted by ‘western’ educated Aboriginal people.

Promoting physical wellbeing

Teachers reported trying to help children, particularly with physical comfort, but some commented on the normalisation of some conditions:

I just try to give kids a different experience… Children just get so used to having lice that they don’t even notice them. It’s as though they build up some sort of tolerance or immunity (Participant 2).

Children develop an incredible tolerance to health problems… they don’t actually realise how sick they are (Participant 5).

At times a liaison officer will visit families in their homes so they can be informed about health problems and treatment options, in their traditional language. This may help families understand what is happening for their kids and how they can take a more active role (Participant 15).

¹⁰ In Aboriginal communities, to ‘humbug’ is to make unreasonable or excessive demands.
So just how much poor hygiene and health affect the children’s wellbeing is difficult to assess. Clearly there are conditions that cause stress and so do affect their wellbeing but equally, there are conditions that cause outsiders alarm that possibly do not affect the children’s subjective wellbeing.

One participant was optimistic:

> We need to stop doing all these things for the kids. If we step back the parents might take more responsibility in caring for their kids (Participant 15).

but others disagreed:

> I think if we stopped caring for the kids they would get really really sick - some might even die it’s that bad (Participant 21).

> If we stopped feeding the kids the parents would not step forward and do it. There’s just no way this would happen (Participant 16).

Research participants expressed frustration when discussing the children’s physical wellbeing:

> A lot of it is neglect - bare foot kids with cuts on their feet from broken glass (Participant 14).

The researcher’s journal noted the same frustrations and judgements as expressed by some staff:

> I judged the parents/carers - why can’t they brush their children’s teeth! (Field note, 21 July 2012)

> I felt really upset. I wondered why the children aren’t cared for the way I care for my son. I reflected on my reactions to what I heard and saw. There had to be deeper reasoning behind the objective level of neglect. I know family is central to the lives of Aboriginal people. They would not actively neglect their children. There had to a reason as to why they are just not cared for (Field note, 15 August 2012).

In choosing to make the statement that ‘family is central to the lives of Aboriginal people’, and later noting the difference between western family values and those of a collectivist society, the researcher highlights the need for careful interpretation of what is witnessed. Perhaps the deeper reason for some of the differences in priorities is that tribal societies are usually collectives, and in such cases the wiser, older members of the tribe have priority over the ‘replaceable’ younger members (Edwards, 1998).

The journal also recorded feelings of despair experienced by the researcher as she cared for the children:
I sat on a chair outside the shower door and instructed [her] on how to wash her tiny body. Starting with her face and hair (which needed two rounds of conditioning to untangle the knots) I suggested she work the lather of soap from her head down to her knees, just like I did with my son. Severely malnourished, at 7 years I believe she has the physical stature of a four year old. I noticed bumps and blisters on her stomach and grey lines on the skin in-between her thighs, undoubtedly caused by a scabies infestation. The relentless itching and angry rash had been scratched so brutally, the bumps were now chasms of irritated infected flesh. She started to cry when the soapy lather filled the unhealthful crevices. I tried to give her a reassuring smile; I felt my eyes swell with tears and I discretely wiped them with the sleeve of my jumper. “You will feel so much better after your shower - I promise”.

When I felt confident that [she] was clean, I wrapped her in a towel washed by the AEO from her class and helped her pat dry her tiny body, careful not to inflict further irritation. I found purple tracksuit pants, a pink jumper and rainbow socks from the pile of clothing donations kept in storage near the shower cubicle. I sat her on a chair and stood behind her, hiding my feelings of revulsion as I attempted to comb through her lice infested hair, coated in inexpensive conditioner (Research Journal, 19 July 2012).

Developing skills and knowledge in children was seen to have long-term implications. If we support their physical health there is a greater chance that they will access the services when they get older (Participant 7).

**Discussion**

Teachers and the School (the Elders in the Council) are continually having to find a balance between caring for the children’s immediate wellbeing and their scholastic development. Whatever the cause of many children’s lack of physical wellbeing, some action is necessary and so the problem is; what to do given the circumstances. The School clearly has a need to act immediately but in the longer term, what policies and practices should be adopted to avoid the circumstances being reproduced?

For the School, adapting the curriculum to suit the children’s readiness for schoolwork, changing the times of operating and the meal program, and more, are perhaps necessary and possible. For the State, consideration of what are seen as cultural conflicts in terms of priorities might need to be to be given increased emphasis.

The expectation is that community-controlled health services will ensure that children will receive these services, and that the services provided will address inequalities in health outcomes (Campbell & Hunt, 2015).

There is now a modern form of nomadicity common among Aboriginal families within the School’s catchment area (Haber, 2015). Significant family events now
include shopping outings, funerals, and football recruiting opportunities and children are not left behind when the older people travel. Haber took advantage of the hours children spent in cars traveling to and from family engagements and designed computer apps they could use on unconnected, cheap mobile phones (Haber, 2015). But this nomadicity conflicts with regular school attendance. Further research is required on this phenomenon to gauge what effect modern nomadicity has on the children’s wellbeing in general. Perhaps, as Haber’s work suggests, schools could adapt some programs and possibly even their health and wellbeing program.

School staff take children to psychologists, social workers and general physicians for treatment and some professionals from such agencies meet children at the School. Many children are withdrawn from classroom activities to attend these appointments. Some staff accept this as part of their work and others resent the use of their precious teaching time.

As it is School staff who take children to appointments etc, they do not get records of the child’s ongoing treatments as parents might. This leads to questions about privacy. In many situations, including when children reveal information about illegal practices and abuse in their community, staff are torn between their formal obligations and their pastoral care priorities.

Both Aboriginal and white participants said chronic health conditions are not adequately managed by the children’s families. Some participants said the lack of support provided to children by their families is neglect, but others see the limited support provided by families, which at times was a great source of frustration for many, as an outcome of a general lack of understanding about the positive effect of treatment options for children. Trudgen (2000, p. 221) has identified that indigenous families, specifically those who do not speak English fluently, operate within a traditional world view and often struggle with understanding how to access medical treatment. Trudgen asserts some Aboriginal people do not understand that some rashes and sores, for example, may be caused by scabies and has described the benefits of educating Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land about these ailments. The data are consistent with those reported by Trudgen (2000). While recognising that children rarely initiate health treatments themselves, there is a question for policy makers about how and how much Aboriginal families, in particular, should be educated at least about the benefits of modern medicine. Indeed, it might be possible to teach children to call for treatment. Subjecting children to compulsory health
assessments has been tried recently as part of the NT Emergency Response Act (2007), but Aboriginal communities have declared the program a breach of privacy and racist (Moreton-Robinson, 2009). It is not known what the School Council or the parents of the School’s children would think about this. Many of the children, it should be noted, are already in Government-managed foster homes, so who should decide about them, and what they would decide, is not known.

Houses in remote communities range from bricks-and-mortar, to tin sheds and makeshift shelters (Bailie et al., 2010). A recent enquiry into the conditions of town camp dwellings has caused much unrest among residents and one Northern Territory community is calling for a parliamentary inquest as long overdue repairs and maintenance have not been carried out on their housing (Krishnan & Gregory, 2016). Residents expressed concern about health and safety impacts from damaged houses. Meanwhile, following an announcement from NT Chief Minister Adam Giles that he had awarded the contract for tenancy management in Alice Springs town camps to a private contractor, other town camp residents have called on the NT Government to give Aboriginal people control of their own housing, (Krishnan & Gregory, 2016). The systemic issues attached to town camp housing undermine the capacity of Aboriginal people to manage their living conditions.

Diseases such as tuberculosis and trachoma that are virtually non-existent in other parts of Australia are prevalent in Aboriginal communities (AMA, 2013). Skin infections are common in Aboriginal children, specifically those who reside in town camps. The most common bacterial skin infections may present as boils, impetigo, folliculitis or cellulitis (Marquardt, 2014). According to Marquardt (2014), skin infections are a significant cause of morbidity in Aboriginal populations. Alarmingly, as many as one in three Aboriginal students have trouble hearing because of a current ear infection, and deafness, mostly caused by untreated ear infections, is a significant issue in Aboriginal communities (Marquardt, 2014).

Many of the risk factors for the health of individuals may be inherent in the conditions in which they live (Bailie, Stevens, McDonald, Brewster & Guthridge, 2010). Bailie and colleagues (2014) investigated the functional state of infrastructure and hygiene practices in remote Aboriginal housing. Using the ‘Healthy Living Practices’ survey in 2014, a standard checklist was used to determine the availability of resources in dwellings that would enable healthy living practices. Data indicated that a significant proportion of the 356 dwellings did not have standard items such as a mop and bucket.
Aboriginal people, especially those in remote communities, experience significant barriers when accessing health services and this affects the likelihood that physical health can be achieved. Richard Trudgen (2000) argues that due to language barriers, many Aboriginal people do not know how to access health services, and lack general understanding of how to treat minor ailments and complaints. Failure to address health ailments and implement effective treatment options may reflect a lack of understanding about specific health ailments and causes, indicating cultural and language barriers can affect physical wellbeing of Aboriginal people, and specifically those in remote communities who are not fluent in spoken/written English.

Food insecurity has been widely recognised as an ongoing issue confronting many Aboriginal residents in discrete communities. A publication commissioned by the Department of Health and Community Services (Northern Territory Government) in 2001 (Condon, Warman & Arnold, 2001) was the first to present a broader picture of health issues confronting Aboriginal people. It drew attention to limited access to an affordable nutritious diet, with hunger an issue for many Aboriginal children. The lack of access to food for many Aboriginal children had previously been identified at the state government level with the development and implementation of the Northern Territory Food and Nutrition Policy and Strategic Plan (1995-2000) (Fejo & Rae, 1996).

For the last 10 years, many of these communities have been repeatedly described by politicians as ‘unviable’. Prime Minister Abbott (Griffiths, 2015) said living in remote communities is a lifestyle choice which the government was no longer willing to support (in fiscal terms). Often the source of the negativity has been the poor living conditions suffered by many, based on national measures that identify access to household resources as an indicator of economic disadvantage. Altman (2010) presents an alternative view regarding the ‘state project’ that he says aims to homogenise Aboriginal communities and discourage small dispersed settlements and mobile populations that are hard to govern and expensive.

The living conditions in Central Australian town camps are usually over-crowded and clearly sub-standard or ‘third world’ (Chitts, 2009). The average house occupancy is about 10 people, but at times there could be as many as 17 (Foster et al., 2005).
How families and communities operate to support members is often determined by cultural practices. In many Aboriginal families, traditional ‘collectivist’ practices still determine some priorities, including the order of priorities with respect to resources, such as food. Neo-colonial and post-colonial perspectives clash then when it comes to judgements about who should have priority, the old or the young (Muswellbrook Shire Council, 2013). Some staff reported that adults prioritising their needs over their children’s (for instance buying alcohol or drugs rather than food) is consistent with traditional cultural practices (Participant 18). But many families are governed by the Federal Government’s Stronger Futures policy (Watson, 2015), and their Basics Card which cannot be used for alcohol or drugs, so it is not clear what happens in fact. As in other Aboriginal communities, people can trade favours for things they want, for instance, food or sex for alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs.\footnote{This card was first trialled in 2016. It cannot be used to buy alcohol or gambling products, or to withdraw cash. Some say it is a significant advance in tackling socioeconomic problems (Langton, 2017) but others say the debit card arouses shame and causes social and economic harm (Klein, 2017).}

**Wellbeing and school preparedness**

Some participants consider that the responsibility for the children’s health, an important aspect of their wellbeing, relates to two different stages in their development. In their first five years, many of the children’s health problems, hygiene, dietary, and other practices are established by their living conditions and carers. Where these have been inadequate and resultant chronic conditions persist, some said the School is responsible only for managing the consequences. Perhaps for some children, starting ‘schooling’ before they are ready, or their families are ready to support them, should be reconsidered.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has identified the physical living conditions and health issues that are common at the School. Many children have chronic illnesses, infections and infectious conditions, and suffer residual damage from early childhood illnesses. The School struggles to do what it can in the short term. Long term policies might need to be changed to cater better for the children and relieve the School of some responsibilities. Above all, there exists a set of significant questions involved in determining who, the Government, the School or the parents/family should manage.
the children’s health issues and therefore who is responsible for the children’s physical wellbeing. Participants’ contributions suggest that across the board, for both Indigenous and other staff, there is a range of understandings that can be characterised as belonging to all positions on a spectrum from neo-colonial to post-colonial.

The data in the next chapter relate to the children’s social and emotional wellbeing.
Chapter 5: Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Introduction

This chapter presents research data about the social and emotional wellbeing of the children at the School.

The themes that emerged in relation to emotional wellbeing include reactivity and self-regulation. The staff provided many examples of times when children were unable to control their emotions and thus their behaviour.

The social wellbeing of children, and the community support available to them that they could engage with, was observed by the researcher and described by School staff in interviews. Sociability is the individual’s ability to connect with others, particularly in meaningful ways, and to benefit from and contribute to social cohesion. Socialisation is the development of that facility.

Noticeable among Aboriginals to an outsider is the continuing role of collectivism which often means Aboriginal children are ‘embraced’ by their social networks, with priorities that at times conflict with those expected in western cultures.

Social settings

Community life

The children attending the School come from a wide variety of ‘homes’ ranging from Australian-style households, as natural, adopted or fostered children, to communities clustered together for convenience, to clustered remnants of traditional families. This contrasts sharply with the stability of the home environment and family connections usually expected of school children. One participant stated:

The children are connected to so many people and they move around within these networks often so it’s hard to keep track of them… it’s also hard to know who their actual parents are - children will call someone mum but then I find out later that it is actually their aunty (Participant 5).

Part of the difficulty for many non-Aboriginal people is understanding the traditional role of kinship structures and how Aboriginal people traditionally organised family and social relations. Today these structures are significantly modified if still practised. The breadth of the children’s social networks often span significant physical distances
and can include multiple town camps, dwellings within the town centre, and bush communities. How this affects children’s wellbeing probably depends on the family.

   Staying connected to the wide family network is really important for children’s sense of belonging and their identity (Participant 23).

In the opinion of an ‘outsider’:

   These kids are actually really lucky. They have many connections to adults and children and they rely on each other for support. I can’t imagine that anyone would ever experience the loneliness that I know many people are suffering from (Participant 10).

But simply being connected may not be enough:

   Because so many members of children’s families are dysfunctional and even dangerous, many children have been removed. One of my students now lives with a foster carer because he watched his grandmother strangled to death (Participant 4).

Many children who attend the School have been temporarily or permanently removed from their families and are living in foster care. Parental separation was identified by a non-Aboriginal as a concern, with a wide range of adverse effects on the wellbeing of children in general, both as a short-term consequence of the transition and in the longer term. It is known, however, that parenting is often shared with the wider family, and traditional Aboriginal ‘families’ are not limited as are typical Australian families. For many Aboriginal children, foster care in a small regional area does not mean isolation from family. Many of the children at the School move in and out of foster care locally and do not change schools:

   I notice that for many kids when they are put into foster care, they are cleaner and the quality of the clothing worn is much better. It must be really difficult for them to be taken from their families, family is everything to these kids, but I definitely do see the benefits (Participant 4).

   I’ve noticed that when kids are taken from their families, they look much healthier initially but this seems to decline after children have been in care for a few months. I have one student who was really well cared for by his foster carer; he came to school wearing shoes and with a packed lunch but all of this has stopped and he looks really unclean and uncared for now (Participant 5).

   The kids never really get the chance to escape the chaos in their lives. They come to school and all their cousins, brothers, sisters are here. Their uncles, aunts and grandmothers work here, so there is no separation. They don’t really get the chance to learn how to do things differently. I don’t think it’s necessarily a good thing, but I would never really say this to anyone else (Participant 11).
Proximity and connection

The children’s out-of-school communities are vertically integrated, with younger children grouping together with older members of their families. This is not what is expected at Australian schools where children are grouped according to age. Research in Norway (Andersen, 2016) has shown that children’s wellbeing is significantly affected by the relationships they have with peers. The children in the research may or may not be ‘connected’ despite being together in what appear to outsiders to be like ‘gangs’ - with peer proximity providing the connection rather than friendship.

Children prioritise their social networks and being physically close to each other is important. I think the school setting poses a challenge for children who may be physically separated from family during the day (Participant 28).

It is not uncommon for a child to run into a different classroom and call several other students out, particularly if there is a fight involving a member of their families and a member of a rival family. Students prioritise such ‘emergencies’ over their schooling and often don’t return to class after the fights (Participant 3).

If one child from the family doesn’t get on the bus in the morning, then there is the chance that none of the kids will come (Participant 15).

Children are totally dedicated to their family so if there is a problem they would rather stay at home or will skip school to hang out with cousins (Participant 22).

Families, as referred to above, are not nuclear as they commonly are now in western societies. Aboriginal children’s families extend to cousins, even those quite distantly ‘removed’ according to western definitions. Belonging to a family is undoubtedly important to children in Aboriginal societies, but what this means is not necessarily what it might mean in a western society.

The attention and support required to help children to develop sociability and thus western social wellbeing strategies is not a priority for them or available to them.

Children spend a significant amount of time with their peers and usually they are unsupervised. I often see peer groups moving around the town and sometimes reports come in from people who see big groups of students up town during school hours and after dark, usually without adult supervision (Participant 3).

The kids are just not supported like our kids are. They have no one following their journey, no one picking them up from school, making them afternoon tea and dropping them at an afternoon activity or for a play with a friend. It’s so completely different; these kids might not see a family member for days and children from very young ages are left to fend for themselves so they spend all their time with each other. They can be dropped off from school to
an empty house and who knows when someone will turn up to take care of them (Participant 14).

Because of the deep bonds they have with each other, it is very likely that if an older cousin or big brother is taking drugs or drinking, the younger kids will too. I know of kids as young as 7 and 8 who are already smoking and drinking alcohol. I know these kids are usually unsupervised, except by their cousins (Participant 18).

There was a little girl who started kindergarten at the beginning of this year. She was four years old so probably could have stayed at pre-school for another year. She hung out with older children at school and used to wag school with them and go up to the shops. She would smoke cigarettes with the older girls – so we’re talking about a 4 year old smoking (Participant 11).

In western societies, the absence of a mother or father is typically managed by an older sibling who cares for the child as their mother or father might have, teaching western sociability skills. In traditional Aboriginal communities, children work their way through groupings based on kinship structures and life stage. Parental care is shared among adults according to strict roles and ceremonies mark transitions from one stage to another. The maturation process takes many years and those who reach senior levels are respected. Fragmented family life, abandoned practices, random governmental interventions and the like have resulted in many Aboriginal people having to ‘make do’.

Lohoar, Butera and Kennedy (2014) claim that ‘Aboriginal kinship reflects a complex and dynamic system that is not captured by non-Aboriginal definitions of family’. The children are not raised according to the old practices now but neither by newer practices. From a very early age they simply ‘hang about’ in groups.

There are often tensions between these groups that may have existed for generations. Children perpetuate these tensions without an understanding of the origins of or reasons for the conflict (Participant 17).

The children’s behaviour appears to stem from a fierce loyalty to one another, although fights and tensions also occur and are common between members of the same families. These close relationships are the most important things in the children’s lives, so their emotional investments in them are high (Participant 3).

Every morning we would wait for the three girls, [xxx] and her two cousins to arrive at school. It was a pretty good class and I would have the other students settled during their morning routine but we all knew that at some point they would turn up. When they got there they would fling open the doors and come into the room like a whirlwind with smiles on their faces. They would push desks over and jump on top of other desks and leap on tables around the classroom, even onto desks where other children were
sitting. Sometimes they would stay after this and want to be involved in some way in the class, at other times they would leave as quickly as they would come. When they did stay sometimes I was really disturbed because I could tell they had been sniffing. Their faces looked grey (Participant 18).

**Socialisation**

The data suggest many things, among them that many of the children lack what most Australians would think of as socialisation. They are not purposefully malicious but simply not in control of their emotions and bored. They are seen in groups but not in tight friendship couplings as are common among western socialised children. Like babies, they vie for attention but often do not take appropriate steps to achieve it in a western society.

There is absolutely no support from families which makes disciplining the children very difficult. We don’t really understand what is happening in these children’s lives and usually when they are mucking up at school it’s because something terrible has happened at home (Participant 15).

One participant said:

Parents who encourage negative behaviour at school, I think, are the ones affected by a history of negative schooling experiences. But the ones who have had the worst experiences just don’t come in at all (Participant 13).

In many cases, the families seem to consist of older children who themselves have grown up undisciplined by either traditional or western practices. School records show it is often the grandparents who bring the children to the School, motivated by their own education, albeit usually by missionaries or zealous colonisers. Many of the younger generation of parents resent the interference in their lives and resist School attempts to socialise their children in western ways.

There have been so many times when parents have directly encouraged destructive and disrespectful behaviour in their children. On family days at the school, I often see parents urging their kids to be disrespectful towards me and towards other kids (Participant 4).

I knew the family outside of school and we had a positive relationship until a classroom incident erupted and I disciplined their child. The child ran home and told her mother about what happened. The mother immediately came to the school, by-passed the office and without knowing my side of the story, entered the classroom and yelled at me for treating her daughter unfairly. They know where I live and for weeks afterwards I was really worried that they would turn up at my house. It was worse during the holidays; I went home for 5 weeks and the whole time I felt anxious that the family might break-in and trash the place (Participant 4).
It may be a question of explicit and implicit education. The children are not necessarily ‘taught’ to lack control but they witness it and perhaps normalise it unconsciously:

There is a lot of support in the school but how these kids behave; it’s probably just their background (Participant 25).

It’s not their fault for the way they act because it’s all they see at home (Participant 22).

**School and the community**

Social wellbeing involves personal comfort with one’s position in society and therefore also, the society’s acceptance of the person. For many of the children, the societies in which they participate are at odds: many families do not participate actively in School activities and often they do not support their children’s participation.

Communication is a problem:

I think some families are just not interested in coming to the school but there are other reasons for why they don’t come… Like notes about school events are sent home with kids by their teachers and another copy is given to them when they get off the bus by the driver. There is no guarantee that a parent or family member will be home to receive these notes, and even if they are, the families may not read them because they are illiterate (Participant 29)

**Family violence and domestic abuse**

What constitutes abuse, in terms of violence, is a cultural matter.

Women and children in particular are dominated by men and can be at threat of physical violence, particularly if they challenge negative behaviours that are considered acceptable (Participant 14).

These behaviours [abuse towards women and children] can be because of quite minor things such as the types of food that are brought into the house and consumed, or they can be very serious such as a woman standing up to her abusive partner (Participant 14).

Even amongst children, there are some individuals who are not challenged by their peers; these individuals ‘rule’ social interactions. Older siblings and cousins in particular appear to have a sense of entitlement that allows them to bully and dictate the behaviour of younger siblings or cousins (Field note, 12 August 2014)

Families will not stand up for their children; they will not stand up against bullies and protect those that are under attack, either physically, emotionally, and psychologically (Participant 10)
In recent times, Australians are being made aware of the risks and prevalence of family and domestic abuse. Aboriginal communities are wrestling with the same issues but, in their case, including introduced practices such as substance abuse accompanied arbitrarily by violence against others. Social wellbeing is threatened by such abuse.

Young girls are particularly vulnerable and need to be taught how to stand up for themselves and to believe they are actually worth standing up for. I teach the girls how to stand up for their rights, to assert their needs. This may instil a confidence in them to challenge the circumstances in their lives which involves a deep tolerance of violence against women (Participant 4).

An Aboriginal child may risk alienation if they do not conform to their community’s social norms, even including violence:

If a child challenges an older cousin, they are really vulnerable to threats of physical violence. Children will conform to the social systems, even if they are unbalanced, as it would be the worst thing in the world for them to be excluded in any way (Participant 19).

A longer-term employed teacher recounted an incident:

They ask me if I hit my wife and I say no, never, it’s not normal behaviour. They find this really hard to believe (Participant 4).

One community Elder added:

The culture says through initiation that the boys need to be strong, aggressive and violent if necessary (Participant 31).

But not all families at the School tolerate violence:

Last week we took one of the boys home and we asked his mum why he hasn’t been at school. She said, “One of the other kids has been hitting him.” This shows that not all the kids are used to the bullying and the violence, it hasn’t become normalised for all (Participant 23).

Perhaps this was not culturally-sanctioned violence. One Aboriginal teaching assistant said:

When we try and discipline these children they indignantly justify their behaviour, using their relationship to the younger child as a reason they should be allowed to bully them (Participant 27).

So here the question is: how does this affect a child’s wellbeing? Is it normalised behaviour?

On one occasion I was yelled at by a student for reprimanding another child for bullying behaviour. An onlooking student defended ‘the bully’ and yelled
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at me saying “err, that’s his cousin”. He totally justified the abuse (Participant 4).

If a child is responsible for another, does it help if the teacher has one way and the
cousin another? What is bullying for these children? Is being yelled at always
bullying? Sometimes disciplining and sometimes bullying? How violent is something
before it is unacceptable violence? Is violence dependent upon the reason for it? Such
questions are raised repeatedly by the interview data.

While there is alarm expressed at the level of bullying and violence observed in the
School’s Aboriginal communities, there must be balancing concerns about how
changing the rules of a society affects people’s wellbeing. At times, the children at the
School assert what they believe to be theirs or others’ rights, but they also defend
violent and aggressive behaviour. Arguably this spectrum of behaviours is a product
of a complex mix of historical, cultural and social dynamics. How these behaviours
are understood by the Aboriginal communities practising them is of concern to the
post-colonial researcher.

Perhaps the most important factor for the children’s social wellbeing is the stability of
the social norms that are relevant to them.

**Two-way schooling**

The ‘two-way’ schooling model aims to help children caught between two cultures
(now practised for multiple cultures and called ‘culturally responsive schooling’). The
School acknowledges the children’s problems by promoting the model and employing
language and culture teachers to engage the children with aspects of Aboriginal
culture which might help:

The language and culture teachers know what’s happening in many of the
kids’ lives and they know how to reach them (Participant 3).

but not everyone agrees:

I think having the language teachers here doesn’t really help. The kids are so
out of control that they [the teachers] don’t even know what to do with them.
The kids don’t listen to them; they have absolutely no respect. These
teachers are the grandmothers of many children here, but it makes no
difference (Participant 15).

Teachers are aware of the difficulties most children have when confronted by
conflicting sets of social requirements, and the challenges for the School’s children in
particular. The two-way model that respects both cultures has been successful when
both cultures are strongly represented, at the school and in the students’ everyday
lives. This is not the case for the children at the School. As an Elder said:

The kids they come to us and ask us lots of questions. They don’t really
understand those white teachers. What they do makes no sense to them. So
they ask us questions about what the teachers wants them to do. Like how to
behave in white fella classrooms. Like the kids, they gets really confused and
so they muck up. I think they still worry about doing the wrong thing. They
just don’t know what them white teachers want ‘em to do. Their lives are so
different at home (Participant 33).

An Aboriginal participant said:

There is this teacher who yells at the kids non-stop all day. It’s not her place.
The kids are used to us growling at them because it’s the way their parents
talk. But it’s different for them white fellas. They have no right to scream at
them (Participant 15).

One teacher explained:

When they are mucking up, I grab their arm and yell at them (Participant 27).

But another staff member said:

If they don’t come to school how will they learn how to change their ways
( Participant 10)?

If kids don’t come they won’t be able to see how to behave properly or
understand what is expected of them… I think school becomes a very
confusing place for the kids that don’t come often (Participant 9).

Lack of attendance can stem from a lack of value being placed on education
by families and limited parental understanding of the reasons for children to
attend school regularly. It can also be the result of children’s social and
cultural obligations, for example the need to attend funerals and family
events that sometimes occur out bush (Participant 25).

The data show again and again confusion reigns both for the children and many of the
teachers. They are not simply living two ways and not at all clear about either way,
confused by inconsistencies at the School and also among their communities.
Frustration is demonstrated at times in very unhelpful ways:

I’ve had one of the big bosses yell at me in front of the kids… it’s so
unprofessional and they say how dare he do that. It shows the kids that it’s
ok for white fellas to disrespect us (Participant 15).

**Emotional wellbeing**

Emotional wellbeing depends upon a set of faculties to do with emotional control. In
Aboriginal communities, as in all others, there are people with mental illnesses that
require special attention and professional help. There is also recognition of the
damage done by colonisation to the emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people in general, evidenced by the resentment felt by many, and it is a problem for the School.

**Trauma and emotions**

School staff often struggle to cope with the erratic outbursts of the children:

Sometimes you forget that you are dealing with trauma and you get so stressed. You are yelling at kids saying sit down blah blah but it’s not helpful, they are traumatised. You know, but sometimes you get so stressed and it gets too much in the classroom. But that can actually exacerbate things because it is bringing up their trauma. It’s putting them back in that fight or flight mode (Participant 3).

One of the biggest factors affecting the kids’ lives is the symptoms of trauma. The disadvantage is much much higher than we see in the wider community (Participant 18).

As many as 80 per cent of our kids have experienced violence and abuse so extreme they have needed government protection (Principal).

There is this cycle of dysfunction: pay back, murder, sorry business, alcohol, big fight, pay back and this causes emotional injuries for the children (Participant 6).

There is the entire trauma that they have suffered which can be quite multifaceted. There are all the other kinds of traumas. I have one kid who is anxious quite a lot. He dissociates for long periods. He randomly makes wild long sounding noises and it’s a symptom of suffering some kind of trauma (Participant 11).

Aboriginal children have been traumatised over many generations without any solutions (Participant 14).

Aboriginal staff said:

For other children, it’s not a struggle managing overwhelming emotional states and they are comfortable. That is not the case for these kids (Participant 18).

There is plenty of evidence of trauma in the children’s lives and little doubt it affects all Aboriginal people in some ways. Unfortunately, there is little a school can do about this but it does have to live with it, and how to cater for children who regularly experience trauma is a special challenge for the School.

Children manage their emotions in unhealthy ways like drinking alcohol, cutting themselves (Participant 5).

Fortunately, not all the children have emotional difficulties. An Aboriginal staff member said:
I do have some students, a couple of girls who are really good. They are not violent at all, they listen to me, follow instructions and I know they come from better homes. They are not around a lot of the violence that most of the other kids are (Participant 5).

**Grief**

Intergenerational grief was identified by interviewees as relevant to the children’s emotional wellbeing.

Grief creates unavailability for children; many families are not dealing with their grief and are medicating it in unhealthy ways (Participant 19).

High levels of grief mean that adults are only just coping themselves, often struggling with alcoholism, drug addiction and self-harming behaviour (Participant 14).

Problems are so wide spread and affect so many adults within the community; children have difficulty identifying adults to whom they can turn to for support (Participant 34).

The perceptions of staff are that there is a prevalence of grief in caregivers, and that this has implications for their capacity to respond to the children’s needs, impacting the children’s wellbeing.

**Behaviour and emotional self-control**

There seems to be confusion between, on the one hand, lack of emotional control and poor behaviour and on the other, the potential for learning to control one’s emotions, self-regulation, and behavioural discipline. Emotional control, in normally healthy circumstances, can be learned (AIFS, 2013; UNICEF, 2012) and should be learned before children start school (as part of school preparedness).

At the School, there are many children who simply have not learned to control their emotions.

The kid might not be in a good mood. A lot of staff says it’s because of what’s happening at home but I don’t always think that’s the case. I think most of these kids are just really defiant (Participant 23).

**Behavioural management**

Staff at the School do not have a shared view of what should be done about children’s emotional outbursts and many responsive practices conflict. Teachers who battle in classrooms are confused by the approaches taken by other staff tackling the problem in a wider context. It is not clear how well the children understand the differences in management. Confusion on the part of the children or their carers is not a positive factor for the children’s emotional wellbeing.
Even when we follow the support systems in place, children are rewarded and this re-enforces negative behaviour. Like when they are taken to the Chaplain he gives them lollies. There have been times when I have a student come back to class actually eating the lollies in front of other kids. What kind of message does this put out there? That if kids muck up they will be rewarded? I am sure [xxx] always mucks up hoping I will send him out (Participant 5).

It’s really frustrating because I send a kid out because he’s been really violent or has spat at me, but then I’ll see the Principal out in the playground hugging him. There is no discipline and the kids know they can get away with anything (Participant 5).

Children lack insight to what constitutes healthy and unhealthy behaviours. They don’t have the skills to reflect on or make conscious decisions about their behaviours so they just repeat what they are seeing at home. They think it’s normal (Participant 20).

An Aboriginal interviewee said:

I growl at the kids, you have to because this is what they are used to and it’s the only way you can get them under control (Participant 14).

Staff are apparently divided on whether they should be teaching children to manage their emotions, and to be self-regulating, or just teaching them to behave well. Again, confusion is evident:

If I notice a kid is getting really angry, I try and help them calm down. Sometimes I put relaxing music on and just help them to relax. If that doesn’t work, I take the kids outside and get them to do something physical (Participant 10). is not

This latter comment suggests that the child’s emotions are controlled by the teacher but possibly the child is not learning to control them. Others spoke differently:

I make sure I never yell at the kids. Yelling just triggers them because of the way they are treated at home. My approach to managing children’s behaviour is to treat them with respect and kindness. I am never aggressive or abusive. They need to learn that there are different ways of behaving from what they see at home (Participant 11).

I try and teach them that while they may be feeling angry or upset at another child, the feelings of anger may be caused by a separate issue, like something that might have happened at home (Participant 15).

An Aboriginal teaching assistant said:

When they are mucking up, I talk to them good way, tell ‘em not to swear in language (Participant 2).

Some staff try to help the children develop good habits:
I have a reward system set up where students earn points in class each day. At the end of the week, on a Friday morning, students are given money based on the number of points they have earned. The money can be used to purchase items from the ‘class shop’ I set up on Friday afternoons. I think it works because money really motivates these kids (Participant 5).

Also consistency, you must pull them up on the small stuff like reminding them that the class rule is to keep your hands to yourself then you must not let them hit, at all, otherwise they end up in huge punch ups so you try and get on top of even the littlest things (Participant 15).

School staff expressed concern about disciplining students and its effect on their wellbeing. Family respect for the School is critical to any benefits from its disciplinary practices:

We have to be really careful that when we discipline children we don’t shame them. If kids feel shame it can stop them coming to school (Participant 11).

On one occasion we suspended one of the high school boys who we later found out was severely bashed by one of his uncles because of the suspension. We really try to ensure that whatever we do at School will not have further consequences for children at home. Sometimes this is overcome by in-school suspensions (Participant 11).

There was one incident when I reprimanded a child for violent behaviour; he actually stabbed another child in the arm with a pencil. I sent him to the Principal’s office; I couldn’t take him because at that point I was in the classroom alone. The student refused to go and he waited outside the classroom with rocks in his hand, if anyone tried to leave he threatened us. At times he opened the door and threw rocks at us. We all tried to hide at the back of the room. I was yelling out and eventually a TA walking past heard me. It was really, really terrifying. There were no consequences at all. Later that afternoon the child was back in my class and I was left to deal with his crap again (Participant 14).

Emotions, behaviour and classroom learning

Sometimes I just need to totally abandon teaching ‘content’ in place of teaching children relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, and physical movement, especially for children who are unsettled. I know they have probably had a really rough night at home (Participant 18).

I am not going to teach them math or English, I am going to teach them how to fucking breathe (Participant 20).

The School environment and role-modelling

One former teacher commented:

Even if I couldn’t do anything about the actual trauma they experienced, I had six hours a day with the children and I could make that a pleasant six hours. And if you add that up over a whole term that is a reasonable chunk of
the pie chart that could be coloured in a different colour to indicate that the child had been in an emotionally well environment (Participant 18).

As well as working to provide a safe environment for the children, recognising it among other things as a form of implicit teaching, the School engages various people as role models for the children. The effectiveness of this strategy varies, and it is supported by some, resisted by others. The role models themselves find it somewhat confusing.

The School invites Aboriginal celebrities to visit the school. A successful young singer who urges the children to work hard, be kind, and behave gently is typical. On other occasions it is a footballer or an actor. Exposing the children to successful Aboriginal people, some of whom have grown up in similar circumstances to the children, is expected to inspire a sense of hope in the children. Ultimately, the aim is for children to be exposed to Aboriginal people who succeed in all the social contexts they encounter, and particularly within mainstream society.

Positive indigenous role models show [the] kids how they interact within wider Australia while still maintaining aspects of their traditional culture. It’s evidence for the children that this is an option (Participant 11).

Our ambassador shows the children that it is possible to succeed in mainstream Australia. She also comes from town camps but hasn’t let the horrors of her childhood shape the direction of her life (Participant 23).

Exposing children to role models is a well-known strategy to advance children’s social capital. Some staff, however, consider it problematic. If it undermines the children’s confidence and status, it may further damage their well-being:

It is really inappropriate to expose children to famous celebrities as role models as it fosters in them unrealistic expectations (Participant 11).

In class not long after she [the ambassador] had left, one student told me that she doesn’t want a job when she grows up, that she just wants to be famous. I think exposure to celebrities actually creates confusion in children about the direction of their lives. Many of these kids won’t even make it to adulthood, and the ones that do might never get a job or be able to stay out of jail yet they get the message that it’s possible for them to achieve what the majority of Australians never will (Participant 9).

Aboriginal men are employed at the School:

We brought these young men in to work with the really traumatised kids, in the hope that they will guide them to adopt behaviour that’s appropriate and to learn to manage their feelings in more healthy ways (Participant 11).
Most don’t have positive role models at home. That’s why I’ve requested an AT who is a male. Culturally I can’t talk to the boys who are getting into trouble. It’s a cultural thing. I can’t look at them and they can’t look at me (Participant 15).

Participants agreed that the young boys were often in close contact with the Aboriginal men, particularly during lunchtime playing football. During interviews, these men shared a similar view that the level of disclosures from children was higher with them than with other staff. But not all Aboriginal men were comfortable in their role:

I don’t relate to the kids because I didn’t grow up like them (Participant 27).

Staff talked about the difficulties of role-modelling more generally:

I think it’s really important to recognise that teaching out here is not like at other schools. The community is actually pretty small, so even outside school hours there is a chance that you will bump into a kid from school. It’s really important that they see you being consistent with your own behaviour. I think it also ties into the trust thing. If you are saying and doing one thing at school and doing something else in the community how can they ever learn to trust you? (Participant 19).

Children don’t always respond as expected:

I feel like I am constantly on show. Last Saturday night there were kids at a concert at the botanical gardens. They didn’t really talk to me there but when I saw them at school they said “we saw you Miss and you were drunk”. They had made this assumption that because I was out and it was a Saturday night that I must be drinking. Turns out I don’t even drink but they would never believe that (Participant 7)!

**Wider community engagements**

The School attempts to widen the children’s horizons and social experiences by engaging them in out-of-school events and bringing other children into the School.

If we connect children to individuals and activities within the wider community, their networks will expand and they will have access to healthier people (Participant 4).

I involve children in inter-school sport activities so they learn how to interact with kids from other schools… with people who don’t come from where they do. I think it’s really positive for them and it challenges people’s judgments. So many people around town think the kids from this school are really bad. When I tell people that I work here they think I’m crazy. The kids here are actually really beautiful and have a lot of love to give (Participant 30).

If we take kids to participate in community events, they learn better ways of behaving and I think there is a chance they will replicate these behaviours in their communities. It’s also important for the community to see that these are
not just bad black kids. They are talented and creative and I think the drumming group gives them [the children] a chance to show the town what they are really capable of (Participant 4).

The School has a program which brings students from one or two urban schools to spend a few weeks per year in the region, and to spend time at the School. Usually some of the visiting students’ parents come and there is a mix of goals for the visits: for the visitors to gain experience of others’ circumstances and to learn to ‘help those less fortunate’; for the visiting students and their fathers (usually) to spend time with their sons (usually) to develop their relationships; and in exchange for accommodation, meals and transport, to provide some funds to the School:

When we have the visiting schools here it increases the ratio of students who display healthy social behaviours and this is really good for the kids. We do have a few good students here but they are really outnumbered by children who are struggling. I guess having the visitors here changes that dynamic (Participant 3).

Having the teenagers in the classroom means children are surrounded by more positive people and you can see the kids just love it. They sit on the visitor’s laps, hug them, and hold hands with them. The kids are so completely starved for attention and affection. I guess it’s kinda (sic) sad they [try] and get their emotional needs met from strangers (Participant 5).

Kids learn from other children how to behave appropriately. Their ideas can be challenged as they may learn there is a big wide world out there, so much more is going on than what occurs within the confines of town camps (Participant 38).

But again, not everyone agrees:

This place is like a zoo. We have so many visitors and I think it’s so wrong. It’s like, let’s come in and all stare at the little black kids. It’s an intrusion on their lives and really inappropriate, not to mention a complete disruption to my day, but no one cares about that (Participant 9).

The Language and Culture Elders identified negative consequences for the children’s wellbeing:

It’s no good those schools come in. People don’t know anything about our School, they come in for 1 hour and they make heaps of judgements and it doesn’t help us or the kids. They feel sorry for us black people (Participant 36).

I think people don’t need to come and make judgements. And they do. They make out like they are caring for us but we don’t need it. We don’t need them feel sorry for us. It’s shame (Participant 33).

I saw it over, and over and over again. White outsiders attempting to respond and propose a solution to issues many before them had failed to address.
Why is it that we always think we will be the one who has a lasting impact? That we are special in the eyes of the children… that we can make a difference in just a few short days before we return to the comfort of our urban lives? (Field note, 5 August 2014).

**Family education**

Participants commented on the lack of family engagement with the School:

Family day, not many families came. Even though they go and pick up the families. … More families need to get more involved (Participant 2).

The participants are aware of the need for children to be supported by their families and the difficulties some families have with this.

You get shame about the teachers … a lot of teachers talked about how uncomfortable the parents felt when they come to the doors. The families that come to FAST have changed, like they are more confident to talk to teachers (Participant 34).

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is an early intervention family strengthening program, implemented at the school-level and facilitated by self-nominated classroom teachers in collaboration with program leaders:

FAST program is focused on parents and kids working together - cooking, games, where you come from (Participant 2).

I think there’s more support from FAST - family day you see a lot of parents coming in at the end of the year (Participant 25).

An Elder noted:

FAST is a really good program for bringing them families together (Participant 33).

Others agreed:

Really positive because it considers the indigenous family structure and draws on these intricate family networks and attempts to develop the ways families engage with their children in more positive ways (Participant 14).

So many families just have no idea how to interact with their children. The role plays we do in FAST are really helpful. We actually support them to actively engage with their children differently (Participant 22).

Longer-term outcomes of the program are seen to be associated with educating families about the value of education which contributes to the children’s respect for the School. The interviewees’ opinions repeatedly showed the difficulties associated with expecting Aboriginal parents and families to participate in and support School activities:
If we can bring the families in, we can teach them how to value education, how to behave, and how to treat their kids (Participant 10).

In the long run we are not just trying to educate these kids; we are trying to educate the whole family. FAST is good for this reasons (Participant 14).

**External professional support**

A strong feeling of isolation and frustration was also exhibited in the data with respect to the need for external professional support for the children:

Many, many children need professional support but as it stands there is no way for us to capture the extent of emotional damage or the prevalence of PTSD within our kids. Without evidence based documentation we have been largely unsuccessful in winning grants that could fund the support that’s so desperately needed (Participant 16).

When problems arise and students need support, it’s very difficult to locate an appropriate support person from the child’s family. We may then pursue other avenues of support for the child, such as psychologists, social workers, and other health professionals (Participant 19).

A range of factors mean that children often do not get the professional help that they need to deal with the problems that impact their social and emotional wellbeing.

There are high turnover rates for psychologists, counsellors, social workers, and case workers and this really impacts on the children’s ability to get the support they need (Participant 16).

For successful treatment outcomes, a minimum of ten sessions is required with a psychologist or counsellor. It would definitely be a great help if parents and families could take children to some of the appointments. Mostly this just doesn’t happen, so teaching assistants or the Chaplain will take a child to their appointment during school hours. There are a couple of psychologists who will see children while they are at school which is helpful (Participant 5).

Most families don’t even have a car so it’s not really possible for them to take the kids from one side of town to the other (most professional services are located on the ‘east side’ of town). This is especially hard for families who live out bush. The language barriers must also be a challenge. Many families don’t speak English very well. They also don’t really understand the therapeutic process: a lot of approaches to dealing with trauma involve talking openly with a stranger. Open disclosure in a face-to-face situation conflicts with cultural values. It’s hugely inappropriate and many just don’t see the value (Participant 7).

Some questioned the value of professional help:

Taking a child to see a psychologist may in fact end up being an additional stress for the child and not helpful in anyway, it just makes their lives more difficult (Participant 8).
The kids would be better off seeing the School Chaplain rather than a complete stranger. I just don’t think they would open up and it just becomes a stress for them (Participant 12).

If a child is taught alternative strategies to dealing with their emotions, they won’t really be able to apply them at home and this creates an incredible confusion in their minds (Participant 5).

Overall, participants recognise planning and delivering services to Aboriginal children as a complex task. Important considerations for service providers include ensuring services are culturally responsive, conducted in suitable, informal, non-threatening settings, and ‘in language’ (that is, in or translated into the languages of the patient and of the carers).

**Mandatory reporting**

All staff is responsible for the safety, welfare and wellbeing concerns of children and to inform the Principal and workplace manager of problems. It is then the responsibility of the Principal to report risk of significant harm to the Department of Family and Children’s Services (FACS-NT). White participants acknowledged their responsibilities but Aboriginal staff did not accept them. Staff said that often the children were not seeking help but simply talking about their lives when they revealed problems:

Abuse has become so prevalent in the lives of so many of the children that it has become normalised to the point that children do not recognise it as a problem (Participant 13).

Due to the extent of the normalisation of these behaviours, the children are oblivious that what they are disclosing is shocking and in need of addressing; it is the teacher’s alarm bells that are ringing, not the child’s (Participant 15).

At the same time, staff themselves showed they were not really sure what to do or in complete agreement about this:

Many children have such low self-worth and experience such shame around what has happened to them, they do not believe they are worthy of support; this leads to children not disclosing. Some of these problems are uncovered when children make disclosures about each other (Participant 31).

I know we have to make reports [to FACS-NT] but, to be honest, there are many times when I haven’t done it and I know I should. I really worry that the family will find out, they all know where I live (Participant 19).

I do put reports in to the Principal about children I am seriously concerned about. The problem is that I have no idea if the reports are formally submitted to DoCs [currently known as FACS-NT]. In fact, I don’t think
they are. It just attracts a lot of unwanted attention to the School and I think DoCs would be here all the time if all reports were processed (Participant 3).

But

If we reported every incident we would have no children here (Participant 20).

It’s not my job to intervene and get involved in what’s happening in children’s lives (Participant 10).

I get really overwhelmed by the large number of disclosures and observed problems in children’s lives and I think it is impossible to report on every single issue; I get really stressed about it (Participant 9).

There is added complexity associated with reporting as children are not usually informed when a report has been made:

Children often think we are not doing anything to help them, they don’t understand that if we do put a report in the responses are not always immediate (Participant 3).

Participant 19 told a story about a child who claimed her mother had thrown hot tea over her, but it later transpired that the child was taking advantage of an old scar to settle a score with her mother.

Once I reported on something that another teacher told me in conversation but I later found out that she had already reported on it. I didn’t know that at the time and I didn’t want to ask because I didn’t’ know whether she would be offended or not. You know? Like was she doing her job properly? (Participant 13)

This is another example of a situation that is confused and therefore causes confusion that does not help with the children’s social or emotional wellbeing.

Suspicion of western ways

White participants identified a general suspicion of ‘western ways’ that was borne out of a history of mistrust of welfare based agencies and educational strategies, the legacy of which is apparent for some of the children at the School.

Many children are exposed to hateful conversations about ‘white people’ at home and are confused by the kindness and respect shown to them by some white teachers (Participant 4).

One teacher described an activity where children were instructed to complete an artwork that involved painting inside images that she had drawn previously onto fabric.
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The image was of one adult and two children; the students agreed the adult was me and that my skin should be painted black. Although I am white, the children said that I must be black because I’m nice (Participant 4).

For others, the children did not follow traditional Aboriginal culture, displaying signs of disrespect equally towards Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff:

A lot of the kids come to school and it’s the biggest fight. They are here to have fun and they don’t care whether you are black or white, they don’t listen (Participant 14).

Many teachers also pointed to a common lack of respect and trust for the police:

One child shared during news that they were hiding their uncle who was on the run (Participant 21).

Wellbeing and achievement

Lack of social and emotional wellbeing has serious implications for children, particularly their participation in education:

You need to ‘crack them’ and that could take the whole year. And then that’s when the system fails them because that child has taken a year to form a friendship before they have actually started achieving. The following year the teacher could understand what the child needs and yet there are all these assumptions that because the children’s home lives are so bad, the pressure to learn needs to be reduced… and for us, how can we actually ‘teach’ when we have so many other care roles to fulfil (Participant 15).

One Elder blamed the white teachers:

At the end of the day, how do you justify this child going from transition to secondary without even being able to spell their own name. The white teachers don’t put pressure on the kids to learn because they just think their lives are so bad. The education system lets the child and the families down (Participant 31).

Some teachers suggested a focus on staff wellbeing was needed:

I suggest we close the school for the day and have a team building exercise day. It’s not a safe place. A lot of people are kept in the dark and we are just hanging on (Participant 15).

Some identified the need for further training as a priority. This included developing staff awareness about how to identify trauma in children:

The system is hopelessly inadequate with assessing trauma and emotional problems (Participant 9).

Our limited ability to successfully apply for and win grants that could fund support services is impacted by the failure of current processes to identify and categorise the emotional injuries of students (Participant 16).
In general, the staff assume trauma is responsible for the children’s emotional and behavioural problems:

It is necessary for us to create space in the day for the kids to actually do the trauma work; otherwise the trauma can affect them for the rest of their lives (Participant 13).

**Discussion**

The findings reveal a set of extremely challenging circumstances, not just in the complexity of the children’s emotional and social wellbeing, but in the difficulties staff encounter in their efforts to support the children. There is a heightened awareness of, and commitment to, personalised and differentiated support for every child, but targeted support at the School level is hindered by limited access to professional agencies who may in fact be able to assist in developing the children’s self-awareness and emotional regulation skills, for example, so that teachers can more effectively exercise their teaching roles.

The staff understandably seem more concerned about the present circumstances than the wider question of what can be done for the future. The extremely limited resources available clearly could not be expected to solve the underlying problems so temporary ‘fixes’ are the focus.

Governmental policy has a longer term responsibility and the data show that significant changes are necessary if the circumstances are not to be perpetuated. Some Aboriginal people have suggested that taking the children out of the dysfunctional home environments and educating them in boarding schools is a solution (Pearson, 2004). Others see this as repetitive of the earlier colonial practices and reject it as a solution. If the children are to remain with their families, the state and federal governments’ focus must be on improving the families’ circumstances.

The participants’ lack of identification with the children’s lived experiences was framed in opposition to the dysfunction and chaos of children’s home lives. Interestingly, many Aboriginal staff expressed views that conflicted with their identifying as belonging to the cultural ‘other’ (Spivak, 1994). In a sense, the ‘others’ were othering, effectively speaking as neo-colonialists.

The research for this thesis reinforces cultural heterogeneity within the Aboriginal participants that adds to the complexity of the analysis. The post-colonial Aboriginal perspective is deeply embedded within the data and difficult to extract.
The female Aboriginal staff typically said they identify with the children because they grew up in similar circumstances, i.e. in town camps. These Aboriginal participants disclosed a history of troubling experiences, but claimed to have found a new direction and changed their behaviour. They recognised the importance of showing the children “they have options; there are other ways to live” (Participant 15), and some said alcohol and drug problems were related to “soul sickness” (Participant 33).

From the data, it is clear that for many of the children, their behaviour is an indicator of a lack of wellbeing. Inconsistencies in disciplinary approaches seem to lead to confusion and conflict between staff. The practices of Aboriginal staff can make many non-Aboriginal staff uncomfortable. They consider that yelling at children simply re-traumatises them. Some teachers said that the behaviour management strategies implemented by Aboriginal staff triggered the children’s misbehaviour.

One teacher said many children hit and abuse themselves physically. Unprocessed trauma was the explanation offered by the special needs teacher for children’s self-harming behaviour. The data indicate that colonial practices and the ongoing political agendas that govern the lives of Aboriginal people have caused deep traumas for the School’s Aboriginal communities, findings that challenge Sutton’s (2009) views that assign responsibility to Aboriginal people for their own suffering.

The usual authoritative structures in mainstream Australian schools do not match those in Aboriginal communities. Close relationships are nevertheless still important for many reasons and children’s emotional investment in these relationships is high.

The children’s social networks, affected as they may be by kinship rules, have an effect on the day-to-day functioning of the School. Children prioritise what they see as community ‘emergencies’ over themselves, and may run to intervene in others’ disputes. Older siblings and cousins appear to have a sense of entitlement that allows them to dictate the behaviour of younger siblings or cousins. When these children are disciplined by teachers, they indignantly justify their behaviour and little is learned about emotional self-control and social behaviour.

In traditional Aboriginal societies, and still to some extent, what is known is controlled. Two young Aboriginal women at the School explained the difference between the role and significance of stories in European cultures and their own stories, which could only be known by those otherwise ‘ready’ to know them. The implication
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is that much of what the researcher might want to know may not be available to her, because she was not ‘qualified’ to know it.

As the School is run by men, with women only in classrooms or the office, there are obvious difficulties within the School driven by the level to which men and women, mainstream and Aboriginal people could discuss issues. The discussion of lore did however indicate that the extent to which traditional culture is practiced depends on children’s home situation, particularly as many children are now living with white foster families and for many children there are few men in their everyday lives.

As well as enlisting help from professionals, School staff are obliged to contact FACS-NT about some disclosures children make. Many teachers expressed concern that reporting to family and community services may damage their relationship with the child and the family. The attitudes of some reflect distrust and lack of respect for family and community services. Teachers said it was impossible to report on every single issue, so they made attempts to resolve some of the issues themselves. Teachers also expressed frustration with School policies in supporting teachers to deal with these matters.

The children in the School seem to be disproportionately affected by family violence, yet what might be considered abusive does not seem to be a problem for the children, who talk openly about what happens in their lives. One teacher proposed that the disclosures may be a way for children to show their resilience, as children can be very proud of what they can deal with.

**Conclusion**

Analysis of the data shows the children’s social circumstances are not ideal. They seem untrained in what is learnable, emotional self-regulation, consequently uncontrolled in their behaviour, not socially competent or supported as they could expect to be at school age, and thus not enjoying emotional or social wellbeing.

Some staff said that it is not their role to provide any form of emotional support to children. Some do not identify it as an issue they were required to contend with; these staff describe children as ‘difficult’. Lacking wellbeing has an effect on the children’s ability to participate effectively in school and this failure itself is evidence of their lack of wellbeing.

Breaking the cycle of lack of wellbeing and behavioural and social problems is beyond the children, their families or the School’s individual responsibility and
control. Without evidence-based documentation, the School struggles to win grants that could fund the support it requires. Long-term solutions are badly needed and probably only the governments can manage the task.

The next chapter presents the data on the children’s cultural wellbeing.
Chapter 6: Cultural Wellbeing

Introduction
This chapter presents data that relate to the children’s cultural wellbeing. When talking of Aboriginal children, it is easy to assume that cultural wellbeing might be about Aboriginal culture but it is common for such children to be thought of as living with two cultures: their home, possibly with a somewhat traditional Aboriginal culture, and their learned western culture. In fact, the children at the School engage with all versions of culture from traditional Aboriginal culture to typical Australian culture. Endorsement of the two-culture needs of most of the children underlies the School’s choice to be two-way, respectful and supportive of both Aboriginal and mainstream Australian culture.

The data in this chapter concern the School staff’s operating definitions of culture and how culture is presented to the children by the School; the facility with teaching Aboriginal and mainstream culture given the diversity of the staff; the ability of the School and the staff to support the children’s cultural development and thus their cultural wellbeing.

In this context, culture is not considered by the researcher to be a set of facts, or physical artefacts with certain competencies, but a practice, ways of knowing and acting. Cultural wellbeing is demonstrated by being able to operate with ease and comfort in the relevant community and associated context. In the case of someone with two cultures, they should be comfortable in both relevant communities and contexts, and for many, this was found to be through operating at the ‘interface’ of both cultures (Nakata, 2002) and not fully participating or demonstrating a level of competency in either.

Cultural wellbeing definitions
Cultural wellbeing, like wellbeing itself, is subject to the culture of those considering it. Within the School, what emerged as significant was the ambivalence about culture itself and this, in turn, caused confusion in the minds of many, as evidenced in their interviews. For different people, cultural wellbeing is about the ‘right’ relationship to traditional culture, about the ‘right’ relationship to western culture, both, or about a third mixed, homogenised culture. Opinions varied:
Our kids have a lot more issues and not so strong in culture…but a lot of other kids are in mainstream schools that are also town camp kids and they do ok. I think it’s about how connected they are to their traditional ways (Participant 14).

**Two cultures**

The need for two cultures is recognised by the two-way model.

The data suggest that ‘authentic’ experiences with Aboriginal culture are not common; those responsible for imbuing the children with Aboriginal culture are themselves, ambivalent about it and often the children’s family practices are neither traditional nor supportive of western culture. Being Aboriginal is not enough:

Firstly I am a teacher, an assistant teacher. Second of all I’m a mum, a dad, a sister, an aunty, a judge, a police officer, a counsellor, a laundry mat person. I’m their maid. It’s too much. They just expect so much from us because we’re Aboriginal (Participant 6).

**Teaching culture**

The Language and Culture teachers, Elders who are not necessarily trained teachers, hold classes in a separate area of the School and are supported by a qualified teacher. Meanwhile, in each grade classroom, there is a teacher and an Aboriginal Education Officer who assists her. In their interviews, most participants assumed that ‘culture’ meant ‘Aboriginal culture’, although they did not seem to recognise the diversity of the relevant Aboriginal cultures.

Most participants have a simple two-way model of the cultural issue:

- Exposing children to teachers who belong to both cultural groups is seen as teaching two-ways (Participant 9).
- Having things in language compared to other schools helps these kids stay strong in culture (Participant 31).
- [Aboriginal Education Officers] are a point of connection to culture for children throughout the school day. It’s really important that we have them in the class (Participant 15).
- I teach language and culture to the kids. It’s important because kids need to learn about their culture (Participant 33).
- We encourage them to go out bush. We teach them about bush medicine, relationships, skin names, respect (Participant 31).

Non-Aboriginal teachers assume the Elders are responsible for teaching culture:

- We have language lessons and cultural excursions that support the kids to learn about their culture and it’s up to the Elders to teach them. I focus on
more mainstream content and teaching kids the skills they will need to be successful in the world (Participant 10).

In many cases, what is ‘taught’ is not necessarily learned. The Aboriginal Elders try to foster a ‘cultural centre of gravity’ in children so they will be able to operate in ‘two worlds’. The implication is that there is a western world and an Aboriginal world, each with its own culture.

We try to teach children while keeping their traditional culture intact. I think this helps promote a balance between the two cultures (Participant 14).

In fact, there are not only two worlds. The children’s circumstances vary enormously and thus their Indigenous cultural experiences and needs vary, as do their ‘western’ cultural experiences. Their stability is threatened by the confusion of cultures involved. Two-way schooling is supposed to allow for multicultural development but it requires clarity and agreement about how it is to operate, who is to be responsible for what – everyone, some with expertise, who?

I’m really exhausted, there is so much that they expect from us. [The classroom teacher] expects me to know everything about culture. She’s always asking me how to do things and what she should teach the kids. I don’t know everything about culture cause I’m Aboriginal (Participant 2).

After school hours, I am supporting the kids. During school hours, I am thinking about drunks on school boundaries. I am supporting the cultural and learning needs of students, negotiating politics (Participant 15).

There is a lot of pressure on us to get these kids to increase performance, not just in general education but in cultural knowledge as well. I tell you at the end of the day I go home, pull down the blinds, take my phone off the hook and crawl into bed. I just can’t face anyone for at least two hours. I need some time to recover (Participant 9).

Aboriginal staff were assumed to be ‘cultural insiders’ but as one male Aboriginal revealed:

I don’t really get how these kids live… I didn’t grow up like them (Participant 29).

We were sent away to boarding school so we didn’t grow up like them (Participant 27).

Not all Aboriginal people understand traditional Aboriginal culture:

I had absolutely no training before I started; I have no idea of what I am doing and how I’m meant to handle the kids. I don’t really understand why they are like they are (Participant 27).
Gender and culture

In the traditional Aboriginal communities, men and women have different responsibilities. Different aspects of culture and folklore are taught to different children, depending partly on their gender, as well as their place in the community, their maturity in cultural terms, etc.

As staff said:

All Language and Culture teachers are women and it may actually be inappropriate for us as women to teach some aspects of culture to boys… but it’s also against our culture for men to teach kids who aren’t part of their mob (Participant 14).

Many traditional aspects of culture are not able to be taught by women and this is problematic when so many men are absent from the children’s social networks (Participant 15).

There are Aboriginal men at the School, employed to provide gendered support for the boys but their focus is not on teaching culture:

We give one-to-one instruction needed so they don’t disrupt the classroom (Participant 13).

Young Aboriginal men are employed at the school to work with the young boys but because they are not from where these kids are, there’s a lack of cultural knowledge (Participant 15).

One Elder argued:

There are young [Aboriginal] men employed here to help control the kids but you don’t need that many; you seen ‘em, eh? (Participant 33).

Despite the School intention to be two-way, the School culture seems to be dominated by mainstream (i.e. ‘white’) cultural values. A female Aboriginal participant noted:

All Aboriginal men in leadership roles should also be community Elders. These young white men come in and tell us what to do and it’s really inappropriate… that’s why we have stopped going to the staff meetings…They don’t respect our traditional ways (Participant 15).

‘Two-way’ demands respect for both cultures

For two-way environments to work effectively, respect must be shown equally for the two cultures. Support from home for the ‘other’ culture is important but:

Most parents cannot do this. They don’t understand what happens at school or what the white teachers are doing. The families see the school as mostly white except for language and culture lessons (Participant 1).

Two Aboriginal members of staff were optimistic:
The kids still have the ability to walk in two worlds despite their chaotic home lives (Participant 25).

A non-Aboriginal teacher explained:

Many factors limit a child’s exposure to information and opportunities to learn the necessary skills that will enable successful participation in mainstream society throughout their schooling years and in adulthood. I think we need to focus on teaching these skills to children and not so much focus on teaching culture, because they don’t learn from their families (Participant 9).

Presumably this person was trying to say that the families fail to work adequately with their Aboriginal culture but it is not up to the School to do this. Successful participation in western culture is sufficient.

There is a feeling among some Aboriginal staff that inequities in the School, as they see them, are racist:

Think there is a lot of racism still embedded in the education system. Even in schools like [the School]. The kids feel racism in our school – all the management people are white even though there are indigenous staff members who are qualified to do that job … school staffing when a person resigns an indigenous staff member is never offered that position, they always get another person … Over the last 10 years, 9 out of 10 indigenous identified positions have then been filled by white people. But there are black people who are qualified … why are indigenous staff the only ones who are encouraged to study and better themselves? Why isn’t everybody encouraged to study? (Participant 14).

Teaching, learning, and language

In traditional Aboriginal cultures, language is more than words: identity is tied to languages and their use is governed by kinship rules (Trudgen, 2000). People identify by reference to their ‘language groups’. Learning one’s language is a significant part of enculturation. In the past, children learned naturally both the language they would speak, and other languages for listening to other people.

The School is unique. We are teaching language, the culture, the families, relationships. Everyone here is related, whether it’s your blood line or kinship system. And that’s important. The School brings that into education through language and culture. We read dreamtime stories, and do Aboriginal art with the kids. We teach language and this is important for identity (Participant 25).

Keeping language alive is about connection to culture. If you’ve got language speaking teachers in the class so kids can pick up what English teachers are saying, helps with behaviour but employing Language and Culture teachers is what really makes this school two ways (Participant 25).
Today, the languages need to be taught but the people who know them are rarely trained teachers. The lack of resources was identified as a challenge for developing the teaching skills of the Aboriginal language teachers:

We are very limited on resources. Unlike in other private schools where families pay fees, we do not receive any financial contributions from families. This means that often the programs and training opportunities are limited (Participant 16).

Some classroom teachers are critical of the teaching practices of the untrained Aboriginal staff:

Language and culture teachers do not adequately ‘teach’ language and often attempts are made to replicate non-traditional teaching practice (Participant 11).

Many of the language teachers take a passive role in their classes and in many lessons all they do is hand out colouring sheets… they give children worksheets with Aboriginal images to colour in and that’s all they do for the whole lesson (Participant 4).

Increasing children’s general understanding of how they are performing socially compared with kids of the same age from other schools, is an important component of learning ‘two ways’. It may actually improve their chance that they could go to a normal school. But it might be difficult for them to be in a school where traditional language isn’t taught. But even here, I think the teachers struggle because they might know language but not how to actually teach (Participant 25).

In fact:

Two of the Language and Culture teachers are undertaking tertiary level qualifications, with the support of the Language and Culture principal (Participant 16).

But some Aboriginal staff expressed frustration:

I don’t know why we even bother studying, we never get the better jobs [and] they always go to the white fellas… look around at the School – all the exec positions are filled by white men (Participant 14).

Teaching language in a classroom is a skilled activity, and languages that need to be taught are unlikely to be used by the children. In addition, there is the problem of which language to teach; the School teaches four of the local languages but the children are from a wider range of language groups. It is beyond this research to investigate why the Council has not employed senior Aboriginal people but it is known that the School’s resources are meagre and indeed, there may not be many senior Aboriginal educational people willing to apply for the jobs.
Inconsistent School interventions

The School Council of Elders clearly want a two-way school and to support the children’s multi-cultural development. Given the very different views of members of the School staff, in practice this means many very different cultural priorities for the children. Part of the problem lies in the different understandings of members of staff about what the School could and should do. Their views are dependent upon their background, own world views, level of education and more, and inevitably lead to mismatches about what they can do and what is required of them.

Typically, teachers feel constrained by the curriculum; despite it being told to them many times that what is taught should be adapted for the children:

- I try to link lessons with culture as much as possible however it is very difficult when the curriculum limits us in doing so (Participant 16).

- I know that I should be teaching the kids about culture but it’s very difficult to include culturally relevant tools in my program. I don’t think there are many opportunities in the syllabus for us to do this (Participant 9).

- There are curriculum requirements across all stages that dictate the content of Australian history taught as a component of the HSIE KLA… a lot of this is irrelevant for these kids (Participant 12).

- I am very wary about teaching the children about the ‘successes’ of early explorers. Captain Cook led the wave of colonisation that destroyed Aboriginal communities, their culture and their pre-colonial history (Participant 24).

- I find it really uncomfortable to work with resources that have clearly been developed from a colonialist ‘white’ perspective (Participant 9).

Teaching Aboriginal children by integrating locally developed resources is a priority for some teachers:

- The Honey Ants [Aboriginal English texts] are a local experience to central desert that was inspired by creativity but also had the academic background. Many teachers use these readers and I think they work well. The kids seem to like them (Participant 5).

A more experienced teacher explained:

- You need to look at best practice in education which ties into universally traditional ways of learning. Syllabus does say this and the syllabus is actually very good. Syllabus is open to interpretation but it takes time to learn the opportunities for diverse application and skill to be able to meet individual learning styles (Participant 14).

Some Aboriginal staff were comfortable with assisting in the two-culture teaching:
It’s easy for me to white fella way and black fella way. My father’s white (Participant 2).

At the orphanage with nuns, they taught us right and wrong and how to read. They taught us white fella ways and I can teach this to the kids (Participant 1).

Others said they had only one culture:

I only have one culture and it’s Aboriginal (Participant 33).

Some Aboriginal staff disagree about [Aboriginal] culture in school:

Leave Aboriginal culture at home and when you get to school, do it white fella way (Participant 2).

I develop the skills and strategies necessary to support each student that is based on their language group (Participant 18).

Newly employed teachers are ambivalent:

It takes a long time to learn about the culture. I haven’t been here for long but I have no idea where to start and I am not sure that it’s right for me to teach it (Participant 38).

I try to incorporate culturally relevant material as much as possible, so for me that means I need to consult with the Elders in the community and use resources from the local culture (Participant 33).

More experienced teachers commented:

You arrive at the school with all of the ideologies about how Aboriginal students should be taught about their culture and as teachers we must support Indigenous culture. But it is a real shock to see students with no interest in their culture and at times destructively protest against gaining knowledge about their backgrounds and community (Participant 14).

I think we can modify the content so that what we teach these children is culturally appropriate (Participant 12).

For some, developing personalised learning plans is more relevant than Aboriginal pedagogy;

Engaging kids with culturally applicable tools is not really important so long as you support their own individual learning styles but I actually think Aboriginal and western knowledge systems are very much interconnected (Participant 6).

I have a heavy focus on symbolism. The kids really respond well to visual images which are much more than focusing on culture. There is a lot of research that shows Aboriginal children have unique learning styles. They are more visual and kinaesthetically receptive (Participant 11).

But how interested are the children in their Aboriginal culture anyway?
I have worked in other Aboriginal communities where kids are still very connected to their land and culture. Unfortunately, the kids here have been removed from their culture and they don’t necessarily associate with it very much (Participant 10).

Kids hate going to language and culture. It’s dying off. Languages is dying off. Elders are dying; the next generation is not carrying the traditions (Participant 36).

An observation evidenced the children’s attitude:

A teacher played traditional music in class: he put on a CD where a didgeridoo was being played. ‘XXX’ jumped up and kept turning the CD off. The children did not want to hear it, in the end it was a ‘battle of wills’. Many children were more interested in hearing hip hop music from the US. They identified more with African American sub culture … Teachers not supporting children to embrace their own elements of culture no doubt compounded cultural dissonance for the children. Children did not want to listen to traditional music (Field note, August 16, 2013).

Teaching two-way

Teaching two-way is a skill beyond standard teaching.

Including the ‘Indigenous voice’ according to post-colonial research priorities does not necessarily enable access to traditional Indigenous knowledge or perspectives:

It took me time to ‘see’ that many Aboriginal Participants lacked awareness of the extent to which they had been enculturated into the dominant cultural mainstream. They did not overtly identify the correlation between the effects of colonialism and historical policy on their identity. I wondered how Aboriginal staff facilitate a two-way approach when elders only perceived that they had ‘one’ culture. Was this a point of confusion for the children - to witness community elders rejecting a bicultural identity while simultaneously emphasizing to children the importance of embracing both cultures? (Field note, August 8, 2013).

Teachers described the situation as they see it:

Their lifestyles are completely different to the lifestyles of yours, and I forget at times that they don’t know what that is… like I’ll be trying to explain something and I go “hang on, they don’t even know what that is”… and I have to think on the spot continuously … and I have to present the work to the kids and it’s tiring. There are some kids who get it straight away and others who just have no idea. Working with many different groups in one class is really hard. At the end of the day you are exhausted (Participant 11).

Non-Aboriginal staff told me about many factors that impact on biculturalism – success in walking two worlds - because Aboriginality is so often associated with dysfunctionality, the emphasis is on mainstream culture as a way out of poverty; THE WAY to a better future. Teachers told me all the reasons for why the families are wrong. I rarely heard positive references to children’s families (Field note, August 8, 2014).
Teaching and role modelling

Teachers are at once concerned explicitly with all that goes with teaching and implicitly as active role models for the children. How teachers handle cultural issues and what is learned by children from the teachers’ behaviour can deeply affect their cultural development and ultimately their cultural wellbeing.

With few exceptions, there is little collaboration exhibited between Aboriginal and other staff at the School:

I don’t really talk much to the language and culture teachers, I don’t ask them about what they are doing, and it’s not my business… I just leave it up to them to teach culture to the kids (Participant 10).

Throughout the day I did not observe any consultation taking place with the TA, who is also a local community elder. [The teacher] engaged students in ‘cultural lessons’ without appearing to be in any way anxious that the focus of the lesson may be inconsistent with the beliefs of the local Aboriginal people, nor did she consult [Language and Culture experts] about the content being taught (Field note, July 20 2013).

An observation of classroom practice is revealing:

Even Aboriginal staff utilised the same techniques as non-Aboriginal staff. They focused on cultural artefacts as a way to teach culture. It seemed tokenistic even to me, a white outsider (Field note, July 29, 2013).

In general, participants focus on the inclusion of cultural artefacts but not on Indigenous perspectives or pedagogy.

Cultural wellbeing evaluation

Lack of recognition and assessment of cultural wellbeing is frustrating for those working with the children:

I can see the improvement in my kids but sadly it is not recognised from the outside because the kids just aren’t performing well in standardised assessments. This also feeds into the perception of parents and community about what we are doing at the School and what we are doing wrong. This creates a lot of pressure and the good work we are doing and the success of students is not recognised (Participant 6).

It does not make sense to me that we are teaching these children two ways yet whenever we are required to assess their competencies, cultural knowledge does not come into it. How can we show outsiders that these kids are making progress when the skills, knowledge and talents that are most relevant to them are not measured (Participant 14).

If there was a NAPLAN for traditional culture they would fail that too. In one sense, the dysfunction almost becomes the culture of those living in town camps. They have a third culture (Participant 15).
Cultural identity

Many of the research participants argued that it is important for staff and children to be able to determine their own culture. But some participants said:

They are not free to practice culture; only those that align with the School’s agenda (Participant 18).

Barriers within and beyond the School limit what children can consider to be their culture.

It’s illegal not to send your child to school. Even if a parent wanted to give their child a more traditional life, they don’t really have a choice (Participant 9).

Children and their families lack the ability to exercise autonomy in their cultural practice. Children are ‘taught’ culture by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff and are exposed to unhealthy aspects of both cultures as they negotiate social interactions throughout their daily lives. They are not advancing their cultural knowledge and they don’t know what culture really means for them (Participant 11).

I found that they [the kids] don’t understand how white culture has impacted on them; and because of this they were powerless over which aspects of culture they adopt, in the present and in the future (Participant 12).

The kids just don’t relate to us because we didn’t grow up like them. Their families are really dysfunctional and that impacts on how they see themselves, especially what it means to be Aboriginal (Participant 15).

Cultural identity is important for cultural wellbeing but the way a child understands their heritage, identity and history is clearly complicated in a multi-cultural context.

Language and Culture teachers say:

We don’t just teach traditional culture but we teach ‘white fella culture’ and classroom culture (Participant 25).

Sometimes kids come and talk to us about what’s happening in the classroom ... the kids might have a problem or be something the teacher is doing they don’t understand (Participant 33).

Cultural participation

There are times when the School’s children are involved in traditional cultural practices with their families and this can result in extended periods of absence from School.

Sometimes families go on sorry business and the children don’t come for weeks, even months at a time (Participant 36).
If they are out bush, on sorry business, there is nothing the school can do. We can’t make them come even though they are missing out on so much learning (Participant 14).

Participating in culture limits a child’s exposure to information and opportunities to learn the necessary skills that will enable successful participation in mainstream society throughout their schooling years and in adulthood”(Participant 9).

A lot of boys in secondary are going through initiation. The student will be away for a few months … but I can’t really talk about that (Participant 15).

This last comment suggests the children have a connection to males from their kinship group although many of them do not have immediate members of the family who are senior males.

While strong connection with culture contributes to overall wellbeing, the children’s absence from the School for cultural activities creates gaps in their scholastic education. The question is: what matters most in these children’s lives? and for their future? Who makes these decisions seems to exclude most of the parents of children at the School and the School itself.

**Out-of-School connections to culture**

The children’s connection to their culture beyond the School context is important. While their cultural wellbeing is critical for their full participation in what the School has to offer them, their cultural wellbeing is largely beyond the control of the School.

An Aboriginal teacher said:

> They do practice culture at home, especially the kids who live in bush camps … boys go through initiation, girls are taught how to paint by their grandmothers. It’s not all drinking and violence (Participant 18).

The truth probably varies from child to child:

> I was told by the teachers that the children who don’t attend aren’t engaged in cultural activities. Mostly just wander the streets or hide down by the dry river bed - drinking and smoking ganja.

> While talking with Aboriginal staff, many said they take their own grandchildren out bush to get away from the stress, to get away from the drinking. They really took pride in this and felt it was their way of fulfilling cultural obligations; to care for family and even if this meant taking the children out of school and away from opportunities to engage in formal schooling, it was seen as worthwhile (Field note, August 18, 2014).

Connections to community may be considered the most important aspect of a child’s life, but some argued that the families did not always support the children’s wellbeing:
A lot of what the children witness at home may become normalised however I don’t think the behaviour reflective of their traditional heritage. I don’t think children understand this and I think this is how they see their culture (Participant 9).

Aboriginal staff also made assumptions about the children’s home life and specifically what they were learning from their families:

The dysfunction at home creates confusion within children about what their culture actually is. It’s no wonder they are at times resistant to engaging with Aboriginal culture while at school (Participant 7).

This comment raises another question: what is this ‘resistance to culture’. How robust is it and how is it manifested? To a certain extent, as it is Aboriginal culture to which the children are resistant, it demonstrates in them what was the earlier colonial view that they would benefit from abandoning their culture. According to Nakata (2002) after centuries of dismissal and disintegration, integrating Indigenous cultural knowledge is complicated for children who are still positioned as ‘Other’; their forms of culture persistently relegated to Western ways of understanding difference.

It can be assumed this resistance to ‘culture’ has been supported by their out-of-school experiences. The background of Aboriginal staff and their life experience is also relevant:

Many Aboriginal staff was educated in mainstream schools, some locally and others at interstate boarding schools (Participant 16).

You’ve got to realise the Aboriginal teachers here were taught by white people and this impacts on the authenticity of cultural knowledge; language and culture is often taught in a classroom/out of context as opposed to culture traditionally being taught out bush and on the land (Participant 1).

I think of a lot of these Aboriginal teachers don’t even know their own culture (Participant 10).

Language and Culture teachers have experienced significant cultural interruption; as members of the stolen generation many have experienced forced removal from their families and communities so their knowledge of culture may be fractured (Participant 7).

**Collectivism**

Participants did comment on the collectivist nature of the children’s social networks, recognising an attribute of Aboriginal culture that has a significant impact on daily life. As a collectivist community, an Aboriginal group will favour the group over the individual in contrast to the individualistic priorities of modern western cultures.
Working with this in the School presents difficulties for the staff unless they can embrace it:

From a young age, students have a heavy reliance on peers so I think encouraging the students to work together really builds on traditional learning styles (Participant 16).

Most great learning happens in groups. I believe this is because from a very young age the kids out here have a heavy reliance on peers. I draw on this inherent strength and aim to make the most out of what they can bring to the classroom. In this instance it’s a connection to others (Participant 7).

**Cross-cultural communication**

Non-Aboriginal teachers said they misunderstand the meaning behind spiritual stories, and this had consequences for the children’s wellbeing:

Children at the School lack the ability to modify their spiritual stories or clarify ideas so that they are easily understood by those who do not operate within their cultural realm… so there is a lot of misunderstanding (Participant 10).

One teacher said:

I made a report about a child because they told me on numerous occasions that there was ‘monster standing their bed watching them sleep. When I heard about the monster, I assumed it was a man and potentially an abusive member of her family. During the process of the report being submitted I found out that the child was referring to a traditional story that involved spirits watching over children while they slept. This child was not at risk of harm yet I made assumptions about the child’s safety and assumed she was in danger (Participant 3).

An observation revealed the complexities of cross-cultural communication.

Languages and cultures have stories embedded and the role of these can be significant. Even when one is not aware of the origin of a story, metonymic triggers can evoke sensibilities that are embedded in the culture, derived from the story. An example of cross-cultural dissonance caused by a story was recorded by the researcher:

I observed students participating in an activity facilitated by two artists from the Bell Shakespeare company. Students were instructed to lie silently on the floor ... in darkness.

After approximately 5 minutes, ... individual children were asked to share the different thoughts that came to them while they were laying in darkness. Some spoke of camping trips and swimming at Ellery Creek. Other children made references to traditional stories: “there were two girls who ran away into the darkness when stars started falling from the sky…they cried tears that were hard like diamonds”; others collaboratively told a story about the ‘white woman’, as follows:
When two families went camping they woke up one morning and the baby from the group was gone. There was talk of the white woman who had come in the night and took the baby away. The white woman with long hair has eyes that turn into big eyes. She can run fast and scratch you, she will steal kids from out bush and she will take them away (Field note, August 13, 2014)

Two Language and Culture teachers also referred to the story of the ‘white woman’ during interviews:

We tell that story about the white woman to keep kids close to camps, and to stop them go (sic) wandering off when they are out bush (Participant 1; Participant 33).

It is difficult for non-Aboriginal staff who do not know the stories to know how to interpret them. Stories set in a western context, about activities in worlds the children never experience, are not very engaging for the children but equally, non-indigenous people do not usually know or recognise traditional Aboriginal stories. They don’t even know how to work with them, the access rules, and possibly they only have access themselves to some of them or particular versions of them. The School has collected some stories from the Elders and printed a number of these in English and teachers use the Honey Ants Readers.

Family Engagement

The involvement of Aboriginal families in the School was identified as an essential component of effective two-way schooling. The descriptions of lack of engagement suggest rather a continuing sense of colonial domination:

Many families are afraid to engage with the School. Why? Initially I assumed it was because they were dysfunctional. What I came to see over time is that the school is an exclusively one way setting that actively excludes Aboriginal people… Possibly those who were not forcibly removed or had not been enculturated through some other means were less likely to engage with the school. I was told that for many families, the school and staff are completely intimidating and there is a complete lack of trust of the underlying agenda for bringing them in… (Field note, August 29, 2014).

I have got nieces and nephews here and their families will not ring the front office, they will ring my mobile continuously…it’s because they are scared, they are intimidated (Participant 14).

I get pulled up in the street and parents say my kid is sick and they won’t be coming in today…So they are telling me beforehand but I say you can’t tell me you’ve got to ring the school (Participant 15).

One participant noted:
We don’t know what’s going on in their lives either, it could be a simple thing that they have put up with so much racism that they have now become racist themselves and they are afraid to talk to a white person (Participant 14).

An Aboriginal staff member explained:

We invite families into our classrooms so they can talk to us in language about what their kids are doing (Participant 33).

Minimal exposure to family members who are upholding responsibilities and commitments that are expected of all adult Australians limits children’s ability to understand what is expected of them as they develop into adults who are also citizens of Australia and the world (Participant 7).

Participants discussed the need for School activities that would benefit both the children and their families:

Having more Elders at the school and more family days… more Elders involved in family days doing dancing – no dancing for a long time and that’s what we keen to do (Participant 33).

Many children at the school do not have exposure to positive cultural experiences at home and this is why the school prioritises ‘teaching culture’ to children (Participant 16).

Discussion

‘Culture’ for the School children seems to relate to their community, identity and what it means to them to be Aboriginal, which conforms to the official education policy viewpoint that “Culture is fundamental to health and wellbeing for Aboriginal families and is a source of strength and resilience for many” (Department of Health and Ageing, 2013).

The ‘complex cultural mix’ emerged as a significant issue for the adults and the children. The data reveal a multiplicity of cultures, largely unrecognised by teaching staff, who consistently reinforce the cultural binary of ‘traditional’ and ‘mainstream’, leading to the experience of cultural dissonance for the children. The children are battling with significant complexity in a world where it seems everyone is struggling.

The two-way schooling approach is about recognising the culture of Aboriginal children. The data show many Aboriginal staff do not identify with the children at the School, as their own cultural circumstances are very different. Data gathered support the views of Yunkaporta (2009) that children negotiate oppositional interfaces of western and Aboriginal culture without fully embracing either. The children at the School do not live in traditional culture, but nor do they live in mainstream culture. As a result they are constantly experiencing cross-cultural dissonance.
Observation of the practice of two-way schooling did not always demonstrate ‘two-wayness’. The language teachers appear, like most others, to reproduce traditional western ways of teaching, consistent with their own experience. This is unsurprising as they no longer live in a traditional way, but if enculturation includes Aboriginal epistemology, it is not appropriate for the children’s development. These teachers’ practice challenges the School’s capacity to deliver a cohesive two-way program (Yunkaporta, 2009).

Data revealed that the cultural priorities of newly graduated teachers results in the intrinsic values or cultural capital of the children not being considered by teachers as they develop and implement their teaching programs, supporting Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of social reproduction. On the other hand, experienced teachers recognised the cultural capital of the children that was even seen by some as superior to the highly individualistic ways of the dominant culture. They considered the value placed on people, place, and the community as the basis for cultural inclusion as opposed to a focus on cultural content. These teachers did not see their students as culturally deprived, but as having a fractured connection to traditional culture. They modified their teaching programs accordingly to adopt a more flexible approach.

Newly employed teachers focused on developing cultural capital that accorded with their own experience and world view. They anticipated that if students placed greater value on their education, there would be an improvement in learning outcomes. Bourdieu (1986) claims that an exchange of cultural capital is required if students from disadvantaged backgrounds are to find success in school. Teachers play a critical role in this exchange if they support the development of dominant cultural capital through practice, teaching strategies and reward programs, for students who are perceived to be disadvantaged.

Cultural integration relates to the amount of time individual teachers dedicate to including aspects of traditional culture in their practice (Yunkaporta, 2009). Despite the ‘two-way’ model, white teachers said it was difficult to balance curriculum demands and the need to incorporate ‘cultural’ activities into their classrooms.

Some staff at the School said the behaviour of Aboriginal staff is not always consistent with the behaviour considered appropriate and desirable by other staff. They questioned the presence of Aboriginal staff in the School saying that it means that the children do not get opportunities for respite from the difficult aspects of
family life, particularly from adults who are dysfunctional in some way. They said it was necessary for the School to be a ‘safe environment’ and employing Aboriginal staff, many of whom are also members of children’s families, undermined the capacity of the School to provide this. It is important to recognise that “one of the more insidious ways that white teachers bring racism into schools is through valuing ‘whiteness’ and European ways of being above all others” (Young & Laible, 2000). At no point during the interviews did white teachers actually refer to mainstream or ‘white’ culture. References to ‘whitefella’ or ‘classroom culture’ were, however, consistently made by Aboriginal staff. Aboriginal participants expressed frustration that not enough Aboriginal culture was taught to the children, and claimed non-Aboriginal teachers prioritised ‘whitefella’ culture. White teachers did not make this cultural distinction (or references to distinct cultural domains). Language and Culture teachers identified a cultural imbalance as children were required to learn about ‘whitefella culture’ or ‘class culture’ as a necessary component of negotiating demands and expectations placed on them by white teachers. From the perspective of Language and Culture teachers, the cultural imbalance stems from the limited inclusion of traditional culture, which makes it hard for children who don’t speak English well. Non-Aboriginal teachers who refer to culture as traditional, and therefore perceived a ‘one way’ approach to teaching children, did not appear to be aware of the extent to which teaching mainstream culture is actually prioritised in classrooms.

Language and Culture teachers identified a need for classroom teachers to increase the inclusion of traditional culture throughout the school day. Aboriginal teachers did not perceive it as primarily their role to teach ‘traditional’ culture, saying non-Aboriginal teachers are also responsible. Language and Culture teachers described a cultural imbalance as children are required to learn about ‘whitefella’ or classroom culture despite the limited inclusion of traditional culture.

Some Aboriginal teachers and teaching assistants made direct statements about opportunities to ‘localise’ content to address children’s diverse needs. They accused white classroom teachers of not doing enough in terms of teaching to a mainstream standard. They said these teachers lower their expectations of students, giving them work that is too easy. Aboriginal staff said children need to learn content that is consistent with what other students across Australia are being taught. Lowering expectations based on race was a concern expressed by many Aboriginal teachers.
Chapter 6: Cultural Wellbeing

Racist messaging about what children can and cannot achieve was described by some as an active response to the children’s circumstances, and not simply racial. White teachers did not describe reflective practices where they consider their own internal biases and implications for the children’s experiences.

Institutionalised racism has been defined by Phyllis-Jones (2002) as the structures, policies and practices resulting from differential access to goods and services and opportunities within institutions by race. Aboriginal staff described feelings of hostility towards their non-Aboriginal colleagues, particularly those in leadership. In this context, and following the views of Aboriginal teaching assistants, power relations are imbalanced and evident in differential access to information, representation and voice. The view of some Aboriginal staff aligns with the ‘culture of separatism’ (Hughes & Hughes, 2013) that has created a second tier of employment where Aboriginal people are channelled into segregated Aboriginal career stream positions like teaching assistants, which re-enforces the perception that Aboriginal people cannot cope in more significant positions.

Some Aboriginal staff said that the children are also aware of racism in the School. A number of non-Aboriginal teachers appeared to make significant judgements about children’s lives, describing the children’s families and communities as dysfunctional and parents as neglectful of their children, reinforcing evidence of ‘racially coded language (Burns & Williams, 2015). One Aboriginal teacher said white teachers always expect the worst of children and their families.

Many Aboriginal staff were educated in mainstream schools, some locally and others at interstate boarding schools. Language and Culture is taught in a classroom when it would traditionally be taught through immersion and in context (Yunkaporta, 2009). Non-Aboriginal staff said Aboriginal teachers try to replicate what white teachers are doing but this undermines cultural traditions. The Language and Culture teachers themselves have experienced significant cultural interruption as members of the stolen generation, so their knowledge and practice of traditional culture may be fractured.

At home many of the School’s children experience a breakdown in traditional family networks. The exposure of children to authentic traditional experiences is usually minimal as many family members are institutionalised, incarcerated, hospitalised or attending an in-patient rehabilitation program. High mortality rates in the community are reflective of wider patterns of mortality for Indigenous adults in remote
Aboriginal Australia (AIHW, 2017c). Many aspects of culture are not to be taught by women, and this is problematic for boys when so many men are absent.

At the School, children are taught aspects of their cultural heritage by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal staff. There are challenges related to which aspects of history are taught to children, and by whom. All Language and Culture teachers are women, so it may be inappropriate for them to teach some aspects of culture to boys. Young Aboriginal men employed at the School lack cultural knowledge, don’t teach culture and, according to one Aboriginal woman, are not appropriate leaders, who should instead be Elders.

The dysfunction many children experience at home creates confusion about what their culture actually is; the dysfunction becomes an aspect of culture for children living in town camps. This may constitute a ‘third culture’ for them, that is neither Aboriginal nor white, but a blend of the two.

Many families want their children to integrate into mainstream culture, while also knowing and understanding their traditional culture. According to Berry (2015) and Berry and Sam (1997), adaptation to both original culture and mainstream culture is referred to as ‘integration’ and is the most psychologically ‘healthy’ outcome of acculturation. Parents and families seeking to have their children understand and experience connections to traditional culture in order to live and deal with mainstream society, represents an important awareness as to how their children might better survive; improving their relationship to mainstream society without losing touch with their identity. Malin, Campbell and Agius (1996) recognised the importance of achieving this balance when arguing that knowing and understanding cultural and community connections will make Aboriginal people ‘strong’ and able to survive in the mainstream culture through education.

There are challenges faced by students at the School that affect their ability to develop skills that are necessary for participation in mainstream society. Minimal exposure to family members who are upholding responsibilities and commitments that are expected of all adult Australians limits children’s ability to understand what is expected of them as they develop into adults who are also citizens of Australia and the world. Many children are not taught functional skills in the home environment; few family members are employed, many do not model healthy lifestyle practices including how to maintain a clean house, shop for healthy food and prepare healthy
meals. Many of the children’s family members are illiterate, and so lack the capacity to exercise control over their basic human rights, for example completing a patient information form at the local hospital. This is important for two-way education which places emphasis on supporting children to participate in the dominant cultural mainstream. Two-way approaches extend beyond the negotiation of the cultural interface to include skills and competencies that enable children to become successful citizens of the world.

Multicultural or two-way approaches to education attempt to ameliorate cultural dissonance by helping educators become more sensitive to culturally influenced behaviour patterns (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011), but awareness of how dominant Australian values shape the teachers’ attitudes towards children is mostly unrecognised in the School. The emphasis on developing children’s cultural competencies is reflective of an agenda to enhance children’s capacity to integrate into the dominant cultural mainstream.

Lack of resources is a significant factor but from a post-colonial perspective, it appears that the control is still in the hands of the dominant sector. Probably only a determined government can produce policies that will make a lasting difference and so far this has not happened. The wellbeing of the children can’t wait. They need to feel secure in their cultural contexts and for this they have to have their confidence reciprocated.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented data that show cultural dissonance is a major challenge for the children at the School, affecting their cultural wellbeing. Bilingual and bicultural education is seen to be essential for addressing educational inequalities but, perhaps due to a lack of government support and difficulties associated with maintaining bicultural programs, even the two-way School is struggling to provide an effective solution to improving the cultural wellbeing of its Aboriginal children.
Chapter 7: Policy Implications and Conclusion

Introduction
There has been a lot of research about the plight of some of the most disadvantaged Australians, Aboriginal people, yet in many situations disadvantage persists. This research has aimed to provide, from a post-colonial perspective, insight into the lives of a group of children who attend a two-way school in remote Australia. The background to the lives of Aboriginal Australians, and in particular the Aboriginal children in the research, the research methods used to learn about the children’s wellbeing, and the data collected, have been presented in this thesis. Through iterative sampling and analysis of qualitative data, certain themes emerged. In a wellbeing framework, these themes identified dimensions of children’s experience which revealed how the situation for an individual child can be structured, described and thus understood. This thesis did not attempt to assess whether the children were healthy, or if wellbeing had been achieved, but rather aimed to present useful, actionable information about their circumstances, insights rarely gained.

This chapter presents discussions and conclusions of the study, highlighting some particular findings and discusses them with a focus on the research questions.

Particular attention is given to the participant’s contributions to the study, assessing the value of post-colonial theories and ‘decolonised’ methods to producing insights surrounding children’s wellbeing, within a neo-colonial environment.

Overview
Generally, the research has focused on understanding the lives of a group of children in Australia who are perceived as disadvantaged through measurement of children’s performance in standardised assessments such as the NAPLAN, through socio-economic evaluations, and other quantitative methods. Much is known about Aboriginal students in general, but less is known about their individual wellbeing, which has implications for their capacity to engage in education and the wider world. Working closely with a small cohort can illuminate the necessary qualitative detail and thus may assist policy makers.

Cowlishaw (2010a, p. 53) called for a different way of thinking about Aboriginal conditions in remote communities and recommended an ethnographic focus on
everyday interactions. This analysis of the lives of children in a remote community focuses on those children’s described by those who care for them. Contributions from School staff have been presented in relation to physical, emotional, social and cultural wellbeing. The intent has been to offer a view of the ‘whole person’ and to provide insight into invisible and immeasurable conditions not previously documented in terms of wellbeing. It is important to consider post-colonialism is not just listening. As Bruce Pascoe (2014) and others have said many times, Aboriginal people also went to schools that taught the old Australian history. Many of them say exactly the same thing as the dominant people, so are the dominant hearing the dominated’s real voices? And added to that, many Aboriginal people are no longer ‘insiders’ – they live and think like the outsiders. Choosing what to hear is important, but in this thesis, the lives of a lot of individuals are being considered and none are the same, so a single image would not make sense. In aiming to portray the children’s circumstances appropriately, this chapter considers the research performed through a post-colonial frame, by exploring responses to the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism and possible implications for the children’s wellbeing.

**Insights from the research**

The role of research in Aboriginal Australia is highly political, and rightly so as misrepresentation of the words, experiences and world views of Aboriginals by white researchers have caused much harm.

Using a post-colonial lens to inform the research design, methods, analysis and representation was seen to be the most ethical way to facilitate research in a remote Aboriginal community. Different approaches and methodologies ensure that research with Aboriginal people can be more respectful, ethical, sympathetic and most importantly useful. Post-colonialism has enabled a more critical approach to the research, but the extent to which the researcher has been able to avoid perpetuating ethnocentric assumptions, racist attitudes and practices is debatable, and cannot be confirmed.

While this research journey was attempted with integrity, ultimately the contribution to the wider community is to offer insights about the experiences of a distinct cohort of Aboriginal children within a particular paradigm.

Reflexive awareness of the researcher’s responses to the circumstances and what she was told about the children’s circumstances was captured in a research journal. These
insights led her to question the purpose of this research, and whose interests it may ultimately serve.

The researcher envisioned that immersion and engagement during each School visit would provide opportunities for collaboration and consultation with research participants. The researcher wanted to build relationships through participation in various aspects of School life. Her situation as a participant-observer had implications for the relational dynamics, particularly with Aboriginal women.

The deepest sharing and disclosures occurred naturally in the company of the women; being present, showing up to everyday activities and at times, being quiet. In earlier visits, the researcher succumbed to the temptation to ask questions as the ‘inquisitive stranger’ (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 47). Paradoxically perhaps, while in the presence of the Aboriginal women, it was in the long moments of silence that the researcher intuitively felt they started to trust her. The researcher sensed they recognised her willingness to wait; to stop asking questions; they had the ‘power’ to share, or not. The researcher’s personal experiences echo the sentiments of Smith: “Indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity” (2012, p.8).

The relational dynamics with participants shifted as the researcher moved into the more formalised role of ‘researcher’. Despite utilising ‘decolonised’ methods, the Aboriginal participants changed their response towards her; their body language, mannerisms and confidence during interviews seemed to dissipate. Some women told the researcher they were worried about saying the wrong thing.

The research has shown how meaning is reproduced in everyday life that often shapes views of the former ‘colonial’ subjects. Dominant views of the former ‘colonial subjects’ came through as presented in the data chapters; oppression and racism is reproduced by social structures that inscribe cultural meaning. This research has shown that one of the challenges confronting children is the continued application of the traditional and mainstream cultural binary, specifically evident in the ideological constructions of the ‘other’ in the views of white staff. Consequently, the hybridity of the children’s cultural context is overlooked, which undermines the right of Aboriginal people to define their Aboriginality.

This research has shown that the stories, values, practices and traditional ways of knowing continue to inform Aboriginal pedagogy and some aspects of the children’s educational experiences. While opportunities do exist for children to learn about their
traditional culture from Elders employed as Language and Culture teachers, the School is bound by the same obligations and strictures as mainstream schools. Consequently, staff navigate a broad political environment that at times hinders their capacity to provide effective two-way schooling and further meet the needs of children. The government continues to intervene in family life and cultural matters of Aboriginal people in this community, compounding deep wounds in the personal and collective memories of people who have experienced loss of children and languages as part of government assimilationist agenda.

The School was established during the era of self-determination as a response to colonial attempts to sever children from their culture. Conservatives argue that self-determination was ‘a foolish era of left wing ideologues’ (Sutton, 2009), and cite as evidence for these claims the poor educational outcomes of Aboriginal children who attend two-way separatist schools.

This research has shown that the problem is not that separatism or biculturalism as a model is unsuccessful, rather that it is never fully embraced. The incredible pressure on teachers, staff and executives to lift student performance while simultaneously fostering skills that will enable successful functioning within the dominant cultural mainstream, has significant consequences for the School community and their capacity to facilitate an authentic two-way learning experience. This could be abated through less focus on ‘Closing the Gap’ and by identifying authentic opportunities for Aboriginal people, and specifically families and the communities, to determine the content and practices they envision as reflecting the needs of their children.

**Wellbeing**

The relevance of post-colonial theoretical perspectives to research about Aboriginal children and their wellbeing has contributed to further understanding about the broader context and the way in which carers respond to their needs. The children’s physical circumstances, usually a measure of wellbeing, tell a story of difference, but such circumstances do not prove that a child cannot function well, despite whatever short-comings they may experience. Aboriginal children’s health has been studied extensively, and it is known to reach a state whereby when children start school they may have residual damage from eye or ear problems, skin problems, injuries or drugs and alcohol. All these things may affect many children over time but during their first few decades, the children may simply learn to live with them. As such, the physical circumstances may not affect the child’s everyday wellbeing as much as might be
thought if viewed through the lens of a white Australian. What does seem to make an immediate difference, however, is what a child brings to a situation, what happens in their minds, as this appears to determine their wellbeing in their interactions with other people, their families and their school.

The wellbeing framework chosen had four main components—physical, social, emotional, cultural—but the work on social and emotional circumstances was merged as it became clear how interconnected these were. The data have demonstrated the applicability of a wellbeing framework as an overall concept, and the type of material that can be assembled. Arguably these children are experiencing poor physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing, although the extent to which each of these impacts on their overall wellbeing varies.

van Krieken et al., (2000) have indicated that there is a strong correlation between education, income and health. It should be remembered that the ability to find and hold down a job is not a sufficiently localised goal for children in some remote communities. Other priorities for Indigenous people may need to be considered and, as evident in the previous chapters, wellbeing is not merely an economic issue. Dockery (2010) states that the focus on Aboriginal people in terms of policy has centred around enhancing capacity for economic participation, which has led to sacrificing cultural elements and that has serious implications for cultural wellbeing. Dockery (2010) argues cultural wellbeing is contingent on connections to traditional culture, and while this may not be an accurate claim for all Aboriginal people, the children and their families at the centre of this research do prioritise maintenance of ‘cultural connectors’, and these priorities seem to clash with mainstream economic demands.

Perhaps wellbeing is a relative construct, and it may be different when viewed from a post-colonial perspective in an Aboriginal context. In this analysis, there is an emphasis on the behavioural and emotional strengths of the children, as well as how they respond to adversity. Emotional disposition is a tendency to feel a certain way where emotional episodes are triggered by thought processes or a response to an external situation (Russell & Barrett, 1999). Malchiodi argues that “children re-live their traumas not only in their minds but also through their actions” (2015, p.xiv). Trauma emerged as a factor affecting all aspects of children’s wellbeing, which highlights the inter-relationship of each wellbeing category. Perhaps the ability for a
child to achieve wellbeing depends upon which aspects of their lives are most closely associated with their wellbeing as a whole.

The domains of wellbeing are helpful in describing the contexts in which wellbeing is experienced. However, to understand wellbeing more deeply we must also consider a range of other influences that contribute to wellbeing, and specifically from the subjective experience of individuals whose lived experiences and circumstances are described by other researchers. This research recognises the importance of cognitive wellbeing and other dimensions not considered in this thesis. However, as information about the children’s lives was developed from the perceptions of others, it was necessary to avoid domain-specific and global evaluations of life satisfaction, which are elements of subjective wellbeing and which therefore cannot be described objectively.

**Policy implications**

For the past 20 years, politicians of all persuasions, educators, community leaders and others have recognised the need to close the gap between urban and regional students (McKenzie, 2017). Without greater awareness of the complexity of the challenges, Aboriginal children in remote communities may continue to operate on the fringe of ‘whitefella culture’ and experience the social boundary that perpetuates disconnectedness and disadvantage.

Indigenous education has been described as a ‘wicked policy problem’ (Hughes and Hughes, 2012). In a series of publications since 2004, the Hughes have blamed poor Indigenous student outcomes on ‘separatist’ education in the Northern Territory. The Hughes’ research fails to grasp the well-established causal relationships between systematic neglect, socio-economic disadvantage, geographic isolation and poor health with educational outcomes. These structural determinants of educational achievement are well noted in research throughout the world, regardless of educational approach. Any consideration of education in remote regions of the Northern Territory must recognise the relationship between levels of attainment and poverty, health, housing, access to government services, infrastructure and socio-economic status (Fogarty, 2012).

Various aspects of the social context have been found to impact on education and how in turn, education can influence that context. This is important as schools, such as the one at the centre of the study, engage with families and their culturally responsive
educational model extends pedagogical approaches, and in fact, addresses many needs that enhance aspects of the children’s wellbeing.

Policies that embed a stronger focus on the children’s wellbeing as a formal element of culturally responsive education would help. Culturally responsive education is not just related to the children’s cultural needs, focused on the colonial assumption that negotiating the cultural interface means balancing the teaching of content and skills between the mainstream and traditional cultural binary. To reinscribe notions of identity—of what it means to be Aboriginal—is, according to Nakata (2012), detrimental to wellbeing. This study shows that indigenous education is characterised by diversity of lifestyle and geographic location, differing histories of engagement with non-Indigenous Australia and a wide spectrum of aspirations for development. These factors are not excuses for poor outcomes. They combine to constitute the reality within which teachers, students and families at the School battle every day to raise literacy and numeracy standards.

As has been recognised for multiculturalism, inter-cultural education (Bash, 2016) is necessary for those who are exposed to multiple cultures. This means training for staff as well as for students. This, in turn, requires significant resources and practices beyond the immediate capacity of the School. Sydney University has adopted a model where education for all staff and students about indigenous culture is being used to alert all to the meaning of multiculturalism (Szkudlarek, 2016). It would indeed be very interesting to continue research at the School to learn more about the difficulties with two or more-way education and the successful strategies used in other schools.

School preparedness
The emphasis on the wellbeing of the children in this research has enabled a view of the preparedness of the children, their parents (or families) and the school for their participation in the School. While a number of schools are already embedding wellness education (Hutchinson, 2017), action to support wellbeing, the children in this research have been shown to have an urgent need for such support. This should be available before they start schooling as such, so their schooling experience can run smoothly. A number of educational systems do not commence academic agendas until

12 The Yirrkala Homeland School has recently developed an Indigenous Wellbeing curriculum to improve student mental health (James, 2017).
the children are, as they consider it, prepared for school despite this not being expected to occur until the children are, in some cases, 7 or 8 (UNICEF, 2012). In the case of the research school, there is a program that helps in this way, FAST, but it is voluntary, and not all those who could benefit from it participate. Perhaps if it became a standard part of the first few years of the children’s association with the School, they would do better when schooling of the more academic type starts.

**Research through a post-colonial frame**

Post-colonial perspectives have provided direction for this research in developing the research design, methodology, analysis and implications and understanding. To illustrate the application of post-colonial theory, this discussion considers the contributions and limitations of attempts to undertake research in partnership with members of the Aboriginal community, while aiming to centre Aboriginal perspectives. A central feature of post-colonial scholarship is the deliberate decentring of the dominant culture so that the ‘voices, perspectives and experiences of people who have typically been marginalised become a starting point for enquiry (Reimer, Kirkham & Anderson, 2002).

There is a need to interrogate the colonial past and its aftermath in today’s context. Literature reviewed in Chapter 2 described the broader context that contributes to the circumstances of Aboriginal children with specific consideration of the policy environment that has impacted on their lived experience. The terms ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘marginalised’ were consistently applied across the literature as conceptually relevant for framing the experiences of Aboriginal people in remote communities, supported by statistical and empirical evidence derived from socio-economic indicators. The children attending the School are positioned as some of the most disadvantaged in Australia.

The terms disadvantage and marginalised in relation to Aboriginal people are problematic because labels can perpetuate negative stereotypes, characterise people as victims of society or lacking agency, and render invisible the strengths inherent to Aboriginal communities (Browne, Smye & Varcoe, 2005). Post-colonial theorising of the circumstances of Aboriginal children who were consistently positioned as disadvantaged, informed an element of the rationale for the chosen methodology; the research was designed to provide Aboriginal staff opportunities to share their
perceptions of the children’s lives that might challenge negative stereotyping that may have been reinforced by centring the voices of those from the dominant culture.

In the early stages of research design, the need for consultation and collaboration with community Elders was emphasised, and specifically members of the Aboriginal School Council to ensure the research process would be ethical and adhere to guidelines for conducting research in Aboriginal Australia. The relationships within the community, between Aboriginal and white staff and between the Aboriginal staff themselves were complex and often contradictory, evident in all the difficulties involved in designing the research, recruiting participants and ensuring that trust was established so they would be more likely to share insights that were truthful. A dynamic methodology evolved to provide further opportunities to engage the Language and Culture teachers (Elders) in the research, but this did not overcome all the difficulties associated with the ways in which human roles are constituted in face-to-face interactions within an institutional setting (Goffman 1959), as cited in Davies, 1989. The Language and Culture teachers expressed feelings of mistrust towards the research as they felt it was heavily aligned with the School executives’ interests, and this challenge was further complicated by their overt expressions of mistrust towards members of the Aboriginal School Council. The methodological approach and research tools aimed to prioritise the voices of Aboriginal participants, but consideration of their own particular historical and racialized locations and personal experiences of privilege and racism and how these experiences affected their relations with others was not acknowledged by the participants.

The research consistently had to balance the ethics of honest representation and the realisation that much of what was contributed re-inscribed negative stereotypes about the ‘dysfunctional Aboriginal’.

Under such circumstances the best that could be done was to present the data about the children’s lives through a framework that provided structure and guidance for representation of what was offered, and which could be seen to be ‘grounded’ in the integrity of centring the voices, perspectives and experiences of people who have been typically marginalised.

**The neo-colonial environment**

Post-colonial theory draws attention to the ways in which the past is present in every moment of every day, in every policy and practice and in the very language we use.
For example, drawing on post-colonial theory as an interpretive lens through which to critically analyse empirical data and policy documents, Syme (2004) illustrates how mental health institutions and policies continue to support a longstanding ideology of assimilation, despite the impetus from Aboriginal people to move towards autonomous control and self-government. The actions and practices of individual teachers emphasised developing competencies in children that would further enable successful participation in mainstream society.

The notion of post in post-colonial implies that we have moved past or beyond the inequitable social and power relations but as Hall (1996) argued, an emergent, new configuration of inequities is exerting its distinctive effects. This study shows how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape the children’s experiences, which is further compounded by current policy agendas. Smith (1999: p. 98) explains: “[to name] the world as ‘post-colonial’ is from indigenous perspectives, to name colonisation as finished business”. Many of the town and bush camps where the children live are governed under the policy ‘Stronger Futures’ and this has an effect on the children’s lives. This research shows that the legacy of colonialism has remained. The tools of colonialism are evident within the community and it is clear how policies and structures have impacted on the experiences of the children.

The influence of western educational principles re-enforces neo-colonial dominance and is considered by some as the last wave of imperialism (Elliott and Grigorenko 2007). Sensitivity to the dangers of inappropriate [cultural] ‘transfer’ may be less evident in those contexts where policy-makers feel strong pressure to introduce educational reforms. It is not the fault of the school, the teachers or staff more broadly; it is because the staff are accountable to the wider education system, especially as there is a greater need for Commonwealth funding, which inevitably equates to greater accountability. The School attempts to connect students on various axes, but it still operates within a framework that is embedded in dominant cultural views, as revealed by the data.

While post-colonial theories help to explain the individual experiences of both students and teachers, they also illuminate structural factors. Nakata claims the structure of the education system can influence the participation and engagement of marginalised individuals and communities, but an individual’s ability to achieve in the system continues to be attributed to individualised phenomena (De Bortoli & Thomson, 2009). Bourdieu (1984, p. 242) argues that individual choices are actually
determined by an individual’s access to cultural or material capital and children who do not inherit knowledge, skills and values consistent with high social classes experience cultural disadvantage as they engage with key social institutions.

The role of the education system is biased toward the culture of the dominant classes and the main role of the education system is to reproduce the values and beliefs of the dominant culture, thus helping to ensure their continued dominance (Bourdieu, 1977, p.491). To achieve the greater purpose of the system, it is the responsibility of key ‘social spaces’, such as the education system, to produce or develop cultural capital in individuals that strengthens their participation in the economy. The role of teachers in producing or developing cultural capital in individuals can be significant, as they possess the power to regulate key social processes of students, specifically with regard to development of students’ skills and ability for academic achievement. It is the goal of teachers to support students to achieve outcomes consistent with the wider rational plan, which, following Bourdieu’s argument, is to reproduce the dominant Anglo-European culture, that increases access to, and hence participation in, economic systems (1977). While the function of the education system has changed over time, the ‘greater purpose’ is ultimately to develop individual skills and attributes that enable successful economic participation (Bourdieu, 1977, p.502).

Dockery (2010) argues for increased recognition of past policy outcomes that prioritized economic participation and demanded a level of ‘cultural sacrifice’ of Aboriginal people.

Post-colonialism seeks out areas of hybridity and transculturation (Spivak, 1999). This ties into the identity constructions of the children as not ‘authentically aboriginal’ because they are not completely immersed in traditional life ways and have adopted elements of dominant culture. The children are struggling to negotiate the cultural interface in a world where those employed to assist them with this complex process are also struggling. Post-colonialism should provide a framework that destabilises dominant discourses in the west, challenges ‘inherent assumptions’ and critiques the material and discursive legacies of colonialism. Cultural identity in Aboriginal Australia is, however, still being produced and reproduced through a polarity that fails to recognise hybridity.

Spivak (1999) refers to the dangers of ‘reviving subaltern voices in a way that might simplify heterogeneous groups’. In order to give action and voice to Aboriginal people and their perspectives, understandings and worldviews, this research
uncovered diverse perspectives that align with Spivak’s concerns about avoiding simplifying heterogeneous groups. In order to be heard, the ‘subaltern’ must adopt western thought, reasoning and language and it seems that because of this, many Aboriginal participants expressed reasoning and forms of logic that aligned with those immersed in the dominant cultural domain. This raises awareness of the ‘politics of articulation’ as identified by Stuart Hall (1996). The children were often as much an ‘other’ to many Aboriginal participants as they were to the ‘western’ researcher who was aware of the ways she may have participated in the construction of stereotypical discourse about the ‘other’.

The process of ‘othering’ still played out in this School and was evident in the views of Aboriginal staff who described a lack of identification with the children because they ‘didn’t grow up like them’. It was not surprising that white staff expressed feelings of confusion about the complexities of the children’s lives, and the challenges they presented within the School environment, but many members of Aboriginal staff echoed these same sentiments and projected stereotyped identities onto the children, despite assumptions of shared cultural characteristics.

It is not uncommon for non-Aboriginal people to equate the culture of Aboriginal people with a culture of poverty, substance abuse, and dependency (Furniss, 1999). These associations are deeply embedded in the consciousness of many Australians but this research has shown that ‘popularised discourses’ about Aboriginal children also continue to shape the way Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff alike relate to them in the School. Negative images of the children and their families were framed as cultural characteristics which may have influenced the contributions of participants. Drawing on post-colonial perspectives to contextualise the assumptions of School staff as reflections of socially shared knowledge helps to locate the problem (for example, social judgements) as socially organised. Reflexivity was a mechanism to actively question, disrupt and render problematic the assertions made by interviewees about the children and their families that re-enforced stereotypes. Despite attempts to include Aboriginal perspectives through culturally responsive curricula, the School is accountable, as are the staff, to the broader system that reinforces patterns of dominance and control.

The language and culture teachers attempt to support students to overcome the challenges and possible disadvantage they face as they engage with School classroom culture by connecting them to their own cultural background and educating them
through a traditional frame about how to negotiate the requirements and stresses placed on them by ‘whitefella school culture’. Another idea that came from the data is that the children, although not living very traditional lives, nevertheless seem to have a strong sense of the collective.

Despite efforts to overcome inequalities and the historical experience of social exclusion and oppression, establishment of the bicultural, two-way model has contributed to reaffirming racial dominance. The School has battled with ‘the underlying imbalance in relations between Aboriginal people and broader society (Browne, Smye & Varcoe, 2005). Constructions of race, ethnicity and culture continue to create patterns of inclusion and exclusion within the education setting, but they are also evident in the socio-economic and health disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Many staff, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, cared for the children, and are dedicated to what they perceived as responding to a set of incredibly difficult human circumstances.

**Evaluating staff contributions**

This research relied on the voices of people who care for, and thus speak for, the children of concern. Some of these people were teachers, some assistant teachers, some carers and others were school executives. Among them were people who identified as Aboriginal and, in some cases, are closely connected to some of the children within extended families or as inhabitants of the same community camps. The research was dependent on what others contributed concerning the wellness of the children. There were distinct differences in what was told depending on the background of the person and how long they had been at the School. School staff coming from outside the community admitted it took at least two years to gain a high level of understanding of the children’s lives but some staff had always lived within the community. Knowing what was of concern with respect to the children’s wellbeing and what could be done about it is clearly not the same thing. Participants varied hugely in their opinions and willingness to express a level of insight into children’s lives necessary to develop responses that demonstrated they had considered the children’s circumstances more broadly and beyond what each child presented at school.

Most teachers come from the local community which, like most remote areas in Australia, is often populated by people whose families have lived in the region for
hundreds if not thousands of years, as well as by people ending their careers, seeking adventure, accompanying partners, or trying to satisfy any of a number of other personal motivations and reasons for moving to the area. Some research participants nevertheless articulated their views on a staffing crisis, an insight that alerts the researcher to the likelihood that a given participant will or will not know much about the children, depending on how long they have been employed. Findings demonstrated that a strong correlation existed between staff who had been employed at the School for longer periods and their levels of care about the children’s wellbeing. Longer term employed teachers and assistants were more likely than newly employed staff to express a greater level of confidence to ‘abandon’ teaching formal content and accommodate the particular needs of the children.

There is an emphasis on measuring success in the Australian education system, although experienced teachers reported that they were no longer, or never had been, driven to focus solely on student achievement in terms of standardised assessments. These teachers had in fact re-conceptualised their notion of success. They recognise that they are regulated by the system (Bourdieu, 1977) but that they would have to take into consideration the socio-cultural factors that may affect the children’s performance. Such an attitude conforms to concerns of some Aboriginal Elders who are adamant the mainstream curriculum is not supporting the cultural aspirations of their people (Pearson, 2003).

Assessment experts often lament that the long-term goals of schooling are less likely to be realised when teachers become preoccupied with standards of achievement (Kohn, 1999). Kohn described how “when we get carried away with results, paradoxically we end up with results that are less than ideal” (1999: p. 231; Masters, 2011). Research for this thesis did not therefore focus on the value or otherwise of standards of achievement. The National Curriculum, as indicated above, calls for appropriate localisation of curricula, and many of the participant teachers took advantage of this. The tension between focusing on academic results and the children’s wellbeing was evident at the School, and led to tensions between staff. Some had joined the School with an unrealistic expectation of their singular capacity to significantly affect the disadvantaged situation confronting the Aboriginal students, overlooking, as others might say, the contextual factors of structural poverty that have an impact on the children’s educational needs.
Some more experienced teachers recognised that individually they could not affect student performance, and were able to recognise the wider social forces that impact on the educational experience of students. Many of these teachers thought the lack of family support was having a significant impact on student learning. These teachers saw their own role as just one factor in a range of influences that affect student learning outcomes.

It is common to talk about ‘parental’ influence in mainstream education, but in an Aboriginal community, where families are less clearly defined and more often multi-generational and collective, raising children is a communal responsibility, so it is more appropriate to refer to families than parents. All teachers described family support as important, but newly employed teachers who perceived themselves as having the ability to affect learning outcomes without family engagement nevertheless showed a willingness to engage families by visiting children at their homes. While mindful of the social factors that influence parental engagement, experienced teachers had relinquished responsibility for engaging parents, saying it was now up to parents and families to show initiative and accountability for the education of their children.

Thus the teachers, the most formally qualified educators and most articulate among the staff, showed a wide range of approaches, beliefs and understandings of the children and their wellbeing. Teaching assistants and other staff varied too in their knowledge of the children and in their awareness of the children’s circumstances.

During the research process, it became obvious that there was no ‘single truth’ to be discovered about the children’s wellbeing, and that there could not be a single perspective from which it might be described.

The rich combination of Aboriginal voices, observational recordings and the researcher’s process of critical reflexivity are intended to both present a deeper understanding of the children’s lives than is typically presented in current scholarly literature in the disciplines of education, sociology, anthropology and psychology, and to expose the way in which the researchers’ world view shapes their research design and analysis. Such an approach enables the researcher to assess whether the research process and procedures allow the participants to communicate their experiences from their individual frame of reference.
Two-way

Naively, one might assume two-way education was easy identified. At the School, children are taught the general curriculum in Standard Australian English (SAE) but are taught to read partly using an Aboriginal English to SAE program, and they all have regular ‘Language and Culture’ lessons from indigenous Elders each week, and lessons are held in Aboriginal languages. The Aboriginal Council of the School described their curriculum as two-way. But a short time in the School and the significant contributions of the staff with respect to the children’s cultural wellbeing, alert one to the complexity of the two-way issue.

Schools have been established and run on two-way models (Dockery, 2010) and there has been research to investigate the benefits or otherwise of this (Collins & Lea, 1999; Wilson, 2014) and there have been governmental policies that affect such schooling models (Dockery, 2010; Appendix 2). Today, most schools in Australia cope with children who have multiple different cultural backgrounds, and the term ‘culturally-responsive’ has come into use (Perso, 2012). The essential characteristic of such schooling models is respect for a range of cultures. The multiple language focus is meant to provide young people with the skills they will need as bicultural or multilingual adults in the modern world. At the School, four specific cultural and language groups were identified and supported by the culture lessons.

Given that the research aimed to find a way of accurately representing the children from a post-colonial perspective, the issue of two-way, or culturally-responsive, education has been considered. The data support some discussion of the two-way model. It is useful to think about the strength of the cultures in the children’s lives. It is evident that there is confusion among the staff about the place of common Australian and the four chosen cultures within the children’s lives. The four language groups are only some of those that are relevant to the children; the confidence, resources and teaching expertise of the Elders responsible could be described as somewhat limited in some cases, and the home contexts of the children seem to be confused so children do not simply move from one home cultural community to another at the School. Families from many language groups are living together, often not very harmoniously, and traditional cultural practices have been diluted. At the School, while the intention is for Aboriginal adults to assume respected positions among the staff, this is not the case: the effects of colonial domination are presumably
largely responsible for this and it is beyond the capacity of the School to overcome the problem.

**Study Limitations**

Research is always limited but three limitations were significant in this research.

First, the Aboriginal children who are the subject of the research were not participants in the research. This was both for normal ethical reasons but particularly because those responsible for them at the School did not want them directly involved. The School is often ‘used’ by politicians, government and charity organisations as the back-drop for their activities. This has led to a culture of suspicion with respect to the outsiders' genuine interest in the School and, characteristically, those outsiders frequently dismiss The School itself in a negative light. A goal of this research is to best express the views of those involved in The School while avoiding compounding the damaging experience of ‘being ’subjects’, too often encountered by the community involved. Nevertheless, it is recognised that future research should maximise inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge that is “a rich social resource for any justice related attempt to bring about social change” (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. 504).

Secondly, The School in focus was chosen for a case study because the researcher had established a connection with members of the School Council and the Principal while visiting The School previously, involved in a One Laptop per Child project. The researcher appreciated the difficulty of being an outsider for her research, but was encouraged in the end by the Council and Principal. They were keen to support research that would, in their words, “tell it as it is”. This courageous stance is not easily attained and it was considered a privilege to be able to work in one of the few Aboriginal schools in Australia, cautiously exercising "ethical relationships based on respect and equality" (NHRMC, 2003, p. 14).

Finally, this research was a case study of one cohort of Aboriginal children who attend a particular two-way school. Little is known about how to manage the complexity of schooling for such children so the goal of the research was to gain deeper insights into the lives of children in such a context, despite the obvious fact that such results would not necessarily generalise. The School is not typical of other
schools: the community involved is not just another community but has its own culture based on its particular circumstances, and the small cohort of children lives within an environment that is geographically and economically unique. These factors affect the community and their children. While the insights gained might question the way disadvantaged Aboriginal children might be better supported in the future, such as by very early intervention perhaps of the type promoted by the HIPPIE program, the times when this might be required, justified or indeed welcomed, may vary enormously. In the end, the research at The School suggests that the current attention to wellbeing prevalent in educational research, combining sociological and educational research, might prove fruitful.

Conclusion

This research has identified some of the complexities of the post-colonial situation at a School in one remote community. Post-colonial scholars have sought to understand the effects of colonial rule and oppression on colonial subjects and their cultures by studying institutions while considering the broader context that may contribute to the neo-colonial environment. Post-colonialism recognises that there was and still is resistance to the west and this was evident in my research.

What has been offered are a range of insights into the circumstances of a distinct cohort of Aboriginal children and while there were many disagreements among participants, there was often consensus in identification of the children’s problems, how they are managed within the School and what needs to change within the broader policy environment. The research has provided an understanding of social relationships between black and white people in one institutional setting that has implications for the relevant children’s wellbeing—how it is understood, and how it is or is not supported.

The potential of such work is that it can provide decision-makers, policy makers, teachers and funders, with better insights needed to appropriately support individual children in their learning. The risk of producing yet another litany of failure points, seen by an outsider and thus often from a neo-colonial perspective, was a constant threat to the research. Post-colonialism is not just about taking the perspective or shifting the focus from the dominant position to that of the dominated; it also includes awareness of the extent to which the dominated express neo-colonialism because, as Bruce Pascoe says of his Aboriginal fraternity, their Elders went to schools that taught
the same history to them as to the dominant colonisers (Pascoe, 2014). While there is no shortage of research that documents the plight and failures, there is very little that enables those interested to engage with the individual and peculiar circumstances of individual Aboriginal children, as this research attempts to do.

This is not a thesis about education, but about children characterised by their wellbeing—by developing descriptions of children’s circumstances it was possible to understand the complexities of children’s circumstances that may affect engagement with school, subsequent educational performance and the possibility of ‘Closing the Gap’. During the course of this study, the researcher had the unique opportunity and privilege to spend time in a remote Aboriginal school. It is widely known that many of the children attending these schools are extremely disadvantaged but due to the complexity of the circumstances leading to their disadvantage, there are very few accounts of Aboriginal children at school.

This study focused on the children who attend a separatist school, and data has been drawn from the perspective of school staff and the researcher, who described their experiences and circumstances, thus allowing the reader to engage with the issues vicariously.

**Summary of thesis**

This concluding chapter summarises the main arguments of the thesis, limitations of the study and proposes recommendations for future research that could extend the current topic.

**Chapter 1**

This thesis began with an introduction which outlined relevant literature and identified gaps in understanding about the circumstances of Aboriginal children generally. The topic of wellbeing among Aboriginal children attending a remote two-way School was explored, the thesis questions and the significance of the study presented to orient the reader to the topic. Although it is important to recognise and document patterns of Indigenous disadvantage, explanations of the causes of disadvantage have often focused on Indigenous people and their ‘lack’ largely embedded in discourses of failure. This thesis has argued for new ways of investigating the children’s lives that incorporates principles of cultural sensitivity and community control.
Chapter 2

The review of literature in Chapter two highlighted the historical context and changing policy approaches to addressing ‘endemic’ disadvantage suffered by Aboriginals in terms of housing, health and socio-economic circumstances. The 2017 Closing the Gap report (DPMC-Cwth, 2017) shows that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational outcomes is greatest in remote locations and specifically for children attending two-way schools. According to Kowal (2008), ‘the gap’ is an organic barometer of continued colonial oppression. Quantitative data can be used to indicate trends and averages in performance in education for example but it tells us little about the individual children, their challenges and their success in overcoming various aspects of disadvantage. The image of statistical inequality highlights the urgency of identifying the circumstances affecting the capacity of Aboriginal children to effectively participate in schooling. Conflicting discourses and competing interpretations of disadvantage illuminate the challenges regarding future policy directions but recent advances in research demonstrate the relevance of focusing on children’s wellbeing. Working closely with a small cohort can illuminate the necessary qualitative detail about how the situation for an individual child is structured, described and thus understood that may assist policy makers.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 explained the theoretical and methodological choices made to support the research design. It has outlined the contribution offered by the conceptual approach of wellbeing as a way for building better understandings of the circumstances of Aboriginal children. It identified key insights from the research which detailed limitations of the study, specifically in reference to using post-colonialism and decolonising methods that aimed to bring authority to the voices of Aboriginal participants. This ethnography has included documentation of people’s ideas-knowledge, values and emotions and has considered the histories of the Aboriginal participants lives, considering the patterns of culture and prioritised the experiences and perspectives of those involved, with particular focus on the ‘Aboriginal standpoint’ as a way to ensure the research undertaken was ethical and addressed methodological limitations of previous studies that did not incorporate aboriginal perspectives.

The combination of the post-colonial lens of analysis with self-consciousness means that this thesis presents what School staff contributed, as well as the researcher’s own
insights, and how it has shaped her approach to the research process and views of the children’s circumstances. The rich combination of Aboriginal voices, observational recordings and the researcher’s process of critical reflexivity are intended to both present a deeper understanding of the children’s lives than is typically presented in current scholarly literature in the disciplines of education, sociology, anthropology and psychology, and to expose the way in which the researcher’s worldview shape their research design and analysis. Such an approach enables the researcher to assess whether the research process and procedures allow the participants to communicate their experiences from their individual frame of reference.

Chapter 4
The children’s physical living conditions and health issues that are common at the School were presented in Chapter 4. Many children have chronic illnesses, infections and infectious conditions, and suffer residual damage from early childhood illnesses. The School struggles to do what it can in the short term. Long term policies might need to be changed to cater better for the children and relieve the School of some responsibilities. Above all, there exists a set of significant questions involved in determining who, the Government, the School or the parents/family should manage the children’s health issues and therefore who is responsible for the children’s physical wellbeing.

Chapter 5
Chapter 5 presented data that showed the children’s social circumstances are not ideal. They seem untrained in what is learnable, emotional self-regulation, consequently uncontrolled in their behaviour, not socially competent or supported as they could expect at school age, and thus not enjoying emotional or social wellbeing.

Some staff said that it is not their role to provide any form of emotional support to children. Some do not identify it as an issue they were required to contend with; these staff describe children as ‘difficult’. Lacking wellbeing has an effect on the children’s ability to participate effectively in school and this failure itself is evidence of their lack of wellbeing.

Breaking the cycle of lack of wellbeing and behavioural and social problems is beyond the children, their families or the School’s individual responsibility and control. Without evidence-based documentation, the School struggles to win grants
that could fund the support it requires. Long-term solutions are badly needed and probably only the governments can manage the task.

**Chapter 6**

Chapter 6 presented data about the children’s cultural wellbeing. Bilingual and bicultural education is seen to be essential for addressing educational inequalities but, perhaps due to a lack of governmental support and difficulties associated with maintaining bicultural programs, even the two-way School is struggling to provide an effective solution to improving the cultural wellbeing of its Aboriginal children.

Language and Culture teachers and other Aboriginal staff perceived the school as mostly ‘white’ and cultural activities were an addendum to teaching activities that are based mainstream culture. These teachers questioned the ability of white teachers to integrate aspects of traditional culture and non-Aboriginal teachers did not feel confident to teach children about Aboriginal culture. Most Aboriginal staff feel they do not belong to ‘whitefella culture’, although data indicate they felt it necessary for children to be competent to learn both traditional and ‘whitefella culture’. Analysis of data indicates that it is unclear how many cultures there are at the School, and how children learn to operate amidst so many inconsistencies between staff and within staff themselves.

Multicultural or two-way approaches to education attempt to ameliorate cultural dissonance by helping educators become more sensitive to culturally influenced behaviour patterns (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011), but awareness of how dominant Australian values shape the teachers’ attitudes towards children is mostly unrecognised in the School. The emphasis on developing children’s cultural competencies is reflective of an agenda to enhance children’s capacity to integrate into the dominant cultural mainstream.

**Chapter 7**

This research has identified some of the complexities of the post-colonial situation at a School in one remote community. Post-colonial scholars have sought to understand the effects of colonial rule and oppression on colonial subjects and their cultures by studying institutions while considering the broader context that may contribute to the neo-colonial environment. Post-colonialism recognises that there was and still is resistance to the west and this was evident in the research.
Chapter 7: Policy Implications and Conclusion

What has been offered is a range of insights into the circumstances of a distinct cohort of Aboriginal children and while there were many disagreements among participants, there was often consensus in identification of the children’s problems, how they are managed within the School and what needs to change within the broader policy environment. The research has provided an understanding of social relationships between black and white people in one institutional setting that has implications for the relevant children’s wellbeing—how it is understood, and how it is or is not supported.

The potential of such work is that it can provide decision-makers, policy makers, teachers and funders, with better insights needed to appropriately support individual children in their learning. The risk of producing yet another litany of failure points, seen by an outsider and thus often from a neo-colonial perspective, was a constant threat to the research. Post-colonialism is not just about taking the perspective or shifting the focus from the dominant position to that of the dominated. While there is no shortage of research that documents the plight and failures, there is very little that enables those interested to engage with the individual and peculiar circumstances of individual Aboriginal children, as this research attempts to do.

This study focused on the children who attend a separatist school, and data has been drawn from the perspective of school staff and the researcher, who described their experiences and circumstances, thus allowing the reader to engage with the issues vicariously. This is not a thesis about education, but about children characterised by their wellbeing—by developing descriptions of children’s circumstances it was possible to understand the complexities of children’s circumstances that may affect engagement with school, subsequent educational performance and the possibility of ‘Closing the Gap’. During the course of this study, the researcher had the unique opportunity and privilege to spend time in a remote Aboriginal school. It is widely known that many of the children attending these schools are extremely disadvantaged but due to the complexity of the circumstances leading to their disadvantage, there are very few accounts of Aboriginal children at school.

One possibility for extending this research further would be to include Aboriginal children themselves as participants to ensure that their perspectives and standpoints are incorporated. There was still an element of generalisability as the children were described collectively and there are differences between the children’s lives and their experiences, specifically, as wellbeing is an individual phenomenon.
This study has not investigated the ways in which policy discourses and values are implemented and negotiated in schools. Another kind of study investigating the issues examined here, could have employed a more participatory action based research approach to gain insight into the ways in which teachers, students and parents envisage Indigenous disadvantage, achievement, inclusion, success and participation; this would be a valuable area for future research. A study designed to establish an understanding of how those involved in education view and understand diversity would also be an important area for future research. Despite these limitations, this study has been able to open up some new ways of thinking about the circumstances of Aboriginal children, and to reconceptualise the ways in which issues of inclusion and equity are encountered in educational intentions and practice. Another avenue for further investigation is examination of the notion of difference and the possibilities for working with this in school settings, particularly within the present discourse of standardisation, ranking and competition which typically relies on sameness.

The central argument developed throughout this study is that there is an urgent need to shift thinking about Aboriginal disadvantage if there is to be any significant movement towards educational justice for Indigenous children. This will involve recognising the importance of wellbeing as an important paradigmatic shift from a deficit approach to strengths based approach to empowerment.

The insights gained in the course of the research can only be considered speculative, since the researcher worked with the community during a specific point in time, and it is ultimately up to the reader to decipher how, if at all, the aspects of children’s lives interact to reproduce disadvantage. Many white researchers have attempted to address the ‘problems’ in Aboriginal Australia by outlining detailed recommendations that do not reflect the desires and aspirations of the people. If we are to consider how best to work alongside Aboriginal people in this particular community, deep consideration is warranted as to how best to nurture the children’s wellbeing, mindful that ultimately Aboriginals have the right to determine what their own wellbeing might mean.
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## Appendix 1 - Research on Aboriginal Education and Wellbeing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Aim/ Findings</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
<th>Themes covered</th>
<th>Implications/observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Watts and Gallacher 1964 | Report of an Investigation into the Curriculum and Teaching Methods used in Aboriginal Schools in the Northern Territory (The Watts and Gallacher Report) | Commissioned by the Federal Government in response to the lack of success experienced by Aboriginal children within a western education system. The study aimed to investigate the curriculum and teaching methods used in Aboriginal schools in the NT. The study included forty-four case studies, thirteen were bilingual schools. The main recommendation was "that the language of instruction throughout the entire school programme be English" (Watts and Gallacher, 1964: 59). According to this report, what was needed was not bilingual education, but better and more appropriate Teaching English as a Second Language methodology. The report advocated bilingual education although the authors argued that the program would not be viable. In their view White teachers could not really be expected to learn Aboriginal languages, there were too many languages and preparing textbooks in all of the languages was not thought to be feasible (Watts and Gallacher, 1964: p.71). | According to Buschenhofen (1983) the objective of the study reflects the general (non-Aboriginal) attitude of government policy of assimilation "… to promote the advancement of the people towards life in and with the rest of the Australian community and on exactly the same conditions as those enjoyed by all other Australians" (Watts and Gallacher, 1964: 33). | - Aboriginals in Education  
- Bilingual Education  
- Curriculum  
- Northern Territory | The sentiments of this report influenced Aboriginal Education in the 1960s. This report was adopted as the NT’s guide in developing bilingual programs. This report laid the foundations for the legislation and administrative changes that would occur at the beginning of 1972 that marked the official beginning of bilingual education in the NT. |
| Watts, McGrath and Tandy 1973 | Bilingual education in Aboriginal | In 1973, the Australian Government set up the Watts Committee; a three person | Many of the recommendations in | - Bilingual Schools | Experimental bilingual programs commenced in five schools following |

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## Appendix 1: Research on Aboriginal Education and Wellbeing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>communities in the Northern Territory: Report and Recommendations</th>
<th>advisory group on teaching in Aboriginal Languages in Schools. Their report provided basic guidelines which assisted with the development of bilingual programs in the Northern Territory (Devlin, Disbray &amp; Devlin 2017). The authors envisaged that schools with bilingual programs would be “agents of cultural continuity” (Watts, McGrath and Tandy, 1973, pp.1, 7). The report advocated two frameworks for bilingual education.</th>
<th>the report were never picked up by government.</th>
<th>- Aboriginal Communities - Northern Territory</th>
<th>the report’s release. A working definition of bilingual education was adopted by the NT Education Division (Devlin, 2017). A School based curriculum Development Model was adopted in the NT in 1973. Teachers were instructed by staff in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to stop being paternalistic. Students were no longer permitted to be given showers or meals at school and attendance fell (Beazley 2009 as cited in Devlin, 2011).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian Parliament. House of Representatives. Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.</td>
<td>Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC)</td>
<td>The Commission investigated 99 cases of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Comprehensive summary of Aboriginal law and justice issues was provided. Explored underlying causes that may bring Aboriginal and TSI people into excessive contact with the criminal justice system.</td>
<td>The terms of reference for the inquiry limited it to such deaths between 1 January 1980 and 31 May 1989. The report concluded that the 99 deaths investigated were not due to police violence although many indigenous community members challenged this finding and the overall study design.</td>
<td>- Social, cultural and legal issues - Incarceration - Policing practices - Courts and imprisonment - Custodial conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Culture: A Matter of Survival: Report of the Inquiry Into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Maintenance</td>
<td>Enquiry was undertaken because of widespread concern over language loss amongst ATSI peoples. Explored the extent of language maintenance through submissions and discussions with ATSI communities. Findings revealed living conditions in remote Aboriginal communities worse than</td>
<td>Locations visited by the committee did not enable a widespread view into the visions of diverse Aboriginal communities.</td>
<td>- Languages - Study and teaching - Government Policy</td>
<td>Recommendations on increasing language awareness, interpreter and translating services, language education policy funding. Recognition of Aboriginal English as dialect variation (Kerr, 1992).</td>
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## Appendix 1: Research on Aboriginal Education and Wellbeing

<table>
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<th>Contributions</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kerr 1992</td>
<td>National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people</td>
<td>Department of Education and Training (DEET)</td>
<td>Based on 180 written submissions and consultation with hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia, spoken submissions to the Department of Employment, Education and Training, the review examined what had happened in Aboriginal education with the aim of providing recommendations to further improve ABTSI peoples experience of education. Findings related to the value of both-ways education, the need for greater access to and participation in education, including curriculum design and development needed. Outlined ways in which education might be more culturally responsive to the concerns of indigenous people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mundawuy Yunipingu 1995</td>
<td>Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families</td>
<td>Australian Human Rights Commission</td>
<td>The inquiry was established by the then federal Attorney-General, Michael Lavarch, on 11th May 1996. Damage to self-esteem and connectedness was the result of separating children from their families. Indigenous families and communities were found to have endured gross violations of their human rights. These violations continue to affect indigenous people’s daily lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkie 1997</td>
<td>The National Inquiry sought to provide an opportunity to discover the experiences of people removed from their families however witnesses were at risk of further trauma as they were cross-examined on their testimonies. The impacts of events described were recorded as evidence but some claim that the events described were exaggerated or minimised and there</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Participation
- Disadvantage
- Indigenous peoples
- Outcomes of education and training
- Statistics

Emphasis on self-determination

The Review leads to the National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996–2002. In 1997 all State, Territory and Commonwealth Education Ministers agreed on a national goal which stated that every child leaving primary school should be numerate and be able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level.
### Appendix 1: Research on Aboriginal Education and Wellbeing

<p>| Co-authored by Bob Collins and Tess Lea 1998/1999 | Learning Lessons Review | This is the first comprehensive review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (NT). The review conducted in-depth Case Studies of schools across the Northern Territory. The review was principally interested in parental concerns and issues to do with educational effectiveness. Key questions guiding the review were: What do Indigenous parents; children and communities want from schools? What is going well? What is not going so well? What are the strategies for the future? The need for strong ESL support for the students was discussed. The report expressed respect for the identity reasons for supporting languages, but raised the question of whether the schools should play a role in helping Indigenous peoples maintain languages. | was an overall failure to 'prove the evidence' (Herron, 2000; Brunton, 1998). The review was commissioned by the NT government as a result of community backlash as the reasons for the termination of bilingual programs were unfounded and without supporting evidence. The release of the report highlighted for many Indigenous communities the lack of past consultation or consideration of educational concerns. ‘Now we think that no-one in the Education Department has read our reports because now you are paying people to come and ask us what we want again. Every year you ask us and every year we tell you but you don’t listen to what we say (community Elder, cited in Collins and Lea, p.37). |
| - Bilingual education - Two-way model - Northern Territory | The policy decision reached following the release of the Report was that: with 'two-way' learning, local languages are used primarily as a means of teaching English literacy. A key difference is that the Gov will be tracking student attendance and their progress much more rigorously (Lugg, 2004 as cited in Devlin, 2011) |
| McConvell and Thieberger 2001 | The State of Indigenous Languages in Australia 2001 | The report provides data for, or information about, nine environmental indicators related to the condition of indigenous languages in Australia. The committee wrote to organisations and linguists working with Indigenous languages and received some very useful replies which were incorporated into the report. However, only a small proportion of those from who information was requested responded. The study found that in 1996 there has been a decrease in the percentage of Indigenous people speaking Indigenous languages from 100% in 1880 to 13% in 1996 (McConvell &amp; Thieberger, 2001). The end of bilingual education in the Northern Territory represents a serious setback for Indigenous languages... Not only have some language programs and positions related to indigenous language programs been lost but the status of Indigenous languages has been downgraded significantly within the education system, even though the Northern Territory Education Department argues that some programs may proceed at individual schools within a 'Two Ways' framework.” (McConvell, 2001). | This committee did not cover the whole country, as a number of language centres in the north of Western Australia and the Northern Territory did not attend or send in a report. FATSIL has created a database of language organisations and programs and indicated to McConvell &amp; Thieberger (2001) that in principle information from this database would be available to this state of Indigenous languages study, which FATSIL supports. However in practice when information was sought from the database, McConvell was told that it is incomplete and could not be given out yet, and that he would have to obtain the information from local and regional bodies but this was difficult to obtain. | - Aboriginal Languages - Torres Strait Islander Languages | The paper made recommendations to improve the source data collections for future studies |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AIATSIS Contributing Authors: McConvell, Marmion and McNicol 2005</th>
<th>National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS) Report 2005</th>
<th>AIATSIS was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government (through the then Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, DCITA) to carry out an assessment of the state of Indigenous languages and language programs in Australia. The consultancy was carried out jointly with the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL) and included the following three components: An Australia-wide survey of the status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages; Identify, document and report on language resource material available, including location; Develop strategies to address the findings of the Australia-wide survey, including considerations affecting program development and service delivery and presenting the findings in a report (McConvell &amp; Meakins, 2005) The need for strong ESL support for the students was discussed. The report expressed respect for the identity reasons for supporting languages, but raised the question of whether the schools should play a role in helping Indigenous peoples maintain languages. Where local people have little or no experience of language programs, it is very important to draw on wider national and international experience because there are many established Indigenous language programs which can teach valuable lessons but these perspectives were not included in this review.</th>
<th>- Status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages - Language resource materials - Intergenerational transmission of language - Language programs Policy implications of the NILS: the report provides guidelines for decision making on what to support and how to improve academic achievement, higher proficiency in second language and improved school attendance Urgent need to establish Regional Indigenous Language Centres and a National Indigenous Languages Centre—so community centres are able to tap into a wider perspective (McConvell, et al., 2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. Contributing Authors: Hannaford,</td>
<td>In the Hands of the Regions: A new ATSIC</td>
<td>The aim was to investigate the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were formally involved in the processes of Government affecting their lives. The review concluded that ATSIC had not connected well with the Indigenous</td>
<td>Challenged the place of elected representative indigenous bodies in the Australian Political system. The Government did not accept the review - ATSIC’s function and roles - Administration - Debates around public accountability Soon after the release of the review, ATSIC became embroiled in controversy following corruption allegations and litigations. Lead to the dismantling of ATSIC which was seen by many commentators as harmful to Aboriginal people in Australia (Ackerman, 2009). The post-ATSIC</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Appendix 1: Research on Aboriginal Education and Wellbeing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Authors/Details</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Huggins and Collins 2003</td>
<td>Australians and was not serving them well.</td>
<td>committees recommendation to replace ATSIC with a different organisation to deliver better services</td>
<td>Funding future of indigenous affairs resulted in a shift towards mainstream service delivery which had serious implications for Aboriginal affairs…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT Board of Enquiry into the protection of Aboriginal Children 2007</td>
<td>Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle Little Children are Sacred</td>
<td>Commissioned by the NT government, the enquiry was established to investigate the ways Aboriginal children could be protected from sexual abuse. The report concluded that neglect of children in Aboriginal communities had reached crisis levels. The report made 97 recommendations relating to child abuse and neglect in regional Aboriginal communities.</td>
<td>Aboriginal people were not consulted. Many claims of child abuse were unsubstantiated. The government failed to follow recommendations. - Child abuse - Child neglect The Australian Government neglected to identify the distinction between abuse and neglect, resulting in the NTER on 21 June 2007, replaced by the Stronger Futures Policy of 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint project between DEEWR and ACU Contributing Authors: Noble and Wyatt 2008</td>
<td>What Works- Scoping study into approaches to student wellbeing (ACU International)</td>
<td>Objectives of the study were to document a broad definition of student wellbeing, links between student wellbeing and student learning outcome, the impact on student learning outcomes of student wellbeing issues such as poor nutrition and student or family drug abuse. Further, the impact of a whole school approach on student wellbeing; current Territory government approaches to student wellbeing. Key findings related to the development of a definition of student wellbeing. Student wellbeing found to be strongly linked to learning outcomes. Phase two of the methodology included round table discussions with thirty-two teacher educators that were conducted in Melbourne and Sydney. No opportunity for inclusion of Indigenous teaching assistants or local Aboriginal educators in the participant sample.</td>
<td>- Student wellbeing - Physical and emotional safety - Pro-social values - Social and emotional learning - A healthy lifestyle Lack of governmental support for developing an overarching national framework/policy statement to underpin student wellbeing; and the implications of such a statement on current/future wellbeing activities; feasibility of a national framework in student wellbeing Implications of this study highlights the importance of developing a nationally agreed understanding of the nature and interpretation of student wellbeing across State and Territory borders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth of Australia</td>
<td>What Works. The Work Program.</td>
<td>The ‘What Works’ team from National Curriculum services undertook this research The researchers argued that much of</td>
<td>- School Leadership This research contributes to a growing evidence-base of what works to get</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 1: Research on Aboriginal Education and Wellbeing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEEWR</td>
<td>Improving outcomes for Indigenous students</td>
<td>in eleven remote schools. The report aimed to identify the strategies, practices and behaviours in each of these schools that have resulted in improved outcomes. Finding revealed strong school leadership, quality teaching and workforce development, adopting a ‘high expectations culture’, and engaging with parents and others in the local community work well for each of these schools in supporting student outcomes (NCS, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory</td>
<td>Bruce Wilson undertook the first comprehensive review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (NT) since Learning Lessons (Collins &amp; Lea, 1999). His report found the area of Indigenous education raises complex technical and practical issues. Specific challenges facing students in the NT includes the number and proportion of Indigenous children who enter school with little or no English (Wilson, 2014). The data gathering and consultation processes for this review illustrated how difficult it is to reach agreement in the area. There were widely varying and often opposed views about the history and experience of Indigenous people. The report provides a strategy that arguably ‘can achieve the kinds of improvements’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- School-community partnerships
- School culture built on high student expectations
- Coherent whole school approaches to evidence based literacy and numeracy teaching
- Supporting ABTSI students to enhance their learning capacity
- Culturally responsive learning content

better outcomes in remote schools (NCS, 2012).
The factors that were identified to work well in the case study schools were built into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan.

The review acknowledges and supports ‘first language and culture as part of a child’s education where qualified teachers are available and communities agree (Wilson, 2014, p. 11). The review does not, however, support the position argued by some respondents that first language is the only or best means of access to English, or that the curriculum should be predominantly taught in Indigenous languages.
### NATSISS 2014–15

**National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey**

NATSISS is a six year multi-dimensional social survey, focused on broad, self-reported information conducted by the ABS.

The recent survey was conducted from September 2014 to June 2015 with a sample of 11,178 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents living in private dwellings across Australia (ABS, 2016b).

Key findings related to wellbeing are presented through the thematic category of social networks. Findings indicated that the majority (86%) of respondents had face to face contact with family or friends at least once a week. 53% reported overall life satisfaction. Health and health risk factors were identified including eye problems however the majority (82.7%) of respondents reported that they are in very good health.

Survey analysis informs Indigenous Policy specifically with regards to education attainment and wellbeing.

The NATSISS is a vital source of data for addressing the human capability story in an Australian Indigenous context. The first NATSISS (2008) was significant in that it enabled, for the first time, an examination of the development of children. Findings suggest policy responses that are suitable for the general population need to be modified in order to significantly benefit the health of Indigenous peoples.
Appendix 1: Research on Aboriginal Education and Wellbeing

| Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2016 | Australia’s Health 2016 | Every two years the AIHW is required to compile a national ‘report card’ on the health of Australian’s and their health system. The review revealed the main contributors to the Indigenous life expectancy gap include: disease incidence and prevalence; health behaviours such as smoking; social determinants such as education, income and employment; and access to health services (AHMAC, 2015). | Where possible, the latest version of data sets has been used however due to the nature of data collection- for example, notifiable diseases are based on a ‘real time’ collection of reported cases, and the counts and rates can change daily. Data is constantly being revised because of discovered errors or anomalies which compromises the validity of findings. | - An overview of Australia’s health - Determinants of health - Australia’s health system - Leading causes of ill health - Health of population groups: main contributors to the indigenous life expectancy gap | This analysis will assist policymakers in the area of indigenous health by showing where interventions are best targeted to reduce the gap for indigenous life expectancy. It is important to note that the gap in life expectancy is a relative measure and, as such, the size of the gap is not just in influenced by changes in Indigenous life expectancy, but also by changes in the life expectancy of the non-Indigenous population (AIHW, 2016). |
| Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2016b | Report on Government Services (SCRGSP, 2016b) | This is the twenty-second edition of the Report on Government services, comparing the performance of governments in the efficient and effective delivery of a wide range of services aimed to improve the wellbeing of all Australians. Captures quantitative and well as qualitative change. | The reports usefulness relies on timely data. While COAG states that they have access to current data for most service areas, gaps remain, particularly for health data (SCRGSP, 2016b). The Steering Committee represents overall authority within the ROGS reporting process. Indigenous representatives are missing from the committee. | - Approach to performance reporting - Social and economic factors affecting demand for services - Child care education and training - Justice - Emergency management - Health - Community Services - Housing and homelessness | The RoGS facilitates improved service delivery, efficiency and performance, and accountability to government and the public by providing comparative information on the provision of government services. |
### Appendix 2 – Policies affecting Aboriginal Education (1960s – 2017)

The table is a brief policy chronology outlining intended outcomes, implications and challenges related to implementing education policy for Aboriginal peoples from 1960s to 2017. It does not attempt to capture every policy event in Aboriginal education in Australia since 1788.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/Period</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Intended outcome</th>
<th>Implications/challenges/observation</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>The Bilingual Education Policy in the Northern Territory</td>
<td>The Watts-Gallacher Report (1964, p.71) advocated bilingual education as the ideal approach for the Northern Territory, even though the authors considered that the program would not be financially viable.</td>
<td>Numerous Indigenous people and non-Indigenous supporters have fought against inequality in seeking to gain access to relevant public education for Aboriginal children and adults. This policy gave Aboriginal people the opportunity to self-determine their right to cultural preservation in education.</td>
<td>Kelm (1968)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>The 1967 Referendum</td>
<td>To alter sections 51 and 127 of the Constitution: “Do you approve the proposed law for the alteration of the Constitution entitled ‘An Act to alter the Constitution’ so as to omit certain words relating to the people of the Aboriginal race in any state so that Aboriginals are to be counted in reckoning the population?”</td>
<td>The alteration to the Constitution transferred State powers to the Federal Government so as to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues at a national level. While these developments were taking place, the general notion of assimilation was itself increasingly being questioned.</td>
<td>Korff (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Aborigines Act (NSW)</td>
<td>The Act made provisions with respect to matters concerning Aborigines and specifically aimed to repeal the Aborigines Protection Act, 1909. The act established welfare services for Aboriginal children and provided increased opportunities to access</td>
<td>The Act reflected changing attitudes to Aboriginal people and the passage of the 1967 referendum. In relation to past administration of Aboriginal affairs, the language of ‘assimilation’, with the underlying assumption that Aboriginal equality could only be achieved by the loss of Aboriginal identity, was formally abandoned. There was an emphasis on bringing Aboriginal perspectives into education.</td>
<td>Heiss (2013)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Aboriginal Study Grants (Cth)</td>
<td>The Federal Government introduced the Aboriginal Study Grants scheme providing financial assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students struggling to complete their schooling due to financial problems. It was introduced to assist indigenous students to stay at school beyond the age at which they were required to attend.</td>
<td>The scheme provided a strong incentive for improvements in participation and retention of Aboriginal students. These outcomes were seen as critical factors for improving skills and making Aboriginal self-determination a possibility.</td>
<td>Partington &amp; Beresford (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme assisting high school students continue through to tertiary education (Cth)</td>
<td>This scheme aimed to increase Indigenous participation in key educational activities to improve educational outcomes.</td>
<td>The 1971 census found more than 25% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders still had never attended school in comparison to only 1% of the European Australian population confirming improved Government efforts were still required.</td>
<td>Partington &amp; Beresford (2003), Oliver, Rochecouste &amp; Grote (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Introduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher’s aides</td>
<td>Increase indigenous participation in education</td>
<td>Greater participation of Aboriginal families in education was achieved. Student school attendance rates improved, as did their educational outcomes.</td>
<td>Cadzow, (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Bilingual Education Policy</td>
<td>Bilingual education programs were developed in schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students. The aim was to improve Aboriginal children’s mastery of English as a second language.</td>
<td>Bilingual education in the NT began as a Federal Labor initiative shortly after Gough Whitlam's government had been elected. The Federal Minister of Education at the time was Kim Beazley Senior who explained that bilingual programs were the best route to mastery of English as a second language. Significant improvement was noted in the educational performance of indigenous students, and in their overall wellbeing.</td>
<td>Harris &amp; Devlin (1999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 1973: Separatism in Education

Pro-separatist policies facilitated the development of Aboriginal education systems that support strategic separatism.

- The NT schools which took on a bilingual program in this year were:
  - Angurugu - Anindilyakwa language
  - Areyonga - Pitjantjatjara language
  - Hermannsburg - Arrernte language
  - Milingimbi - Gupapuyngu language
  - Warruwi, Goulburn Island - Maung language
  - Yiprinya – The only school in Australia to teach four indigenous languages

Darwin offices of Commonwealth Department of Education, which from Territory self-government in 1978 becomes the NT Education Department, emphasised cultural preservation through first language programs. Bilingual education models embraced bicultural pedagogy.

Harris & Devlin (1999)

### 1973: The Whitlam Government

**Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA)**

Self-management/ Self Determination Era formally commences as a policy agenda

With the establishment of the DAA, federal government introduced ‘self-determination’ as a key guiding principle in Aboriginal Affairs policy-making. Government looks to achieve further progress for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the two principles of consultation and self-determination, that was, with the involvement of the Aboriginal people in the

The policy was later described as ‘one of the most revolutionary policy changes ever enacted in Australian government policy’. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were increasingly involved in education planning and delivery, signalling a growing respect for Aboriginal people's abilities to learn and teach from multiple cultures of education.

The overt outcomes of self-determination for bicultural schooling were undermined as many Aboriginal schools were struggling in the ‘consolidation’ phase implemented by state governments.

Altman & Sanders (1991)
McConvell & Thieberger, (2001)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978-1986</td>
<td>Bilingual programs entered a consolidation phase</td>
<td>'Consolidation' was essentially understood to mean that there was no money available to establish new programs.</td>
<td>Harris &amp; Devlin (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1987</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Policy Department of Aboriginal Affairs</td>
<td>The New South Wales National Aboriginal Education Committee introduced the Aboriginal Education Policy, with guidance from the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, and in the pursuit of social justice and equity. The NT Government endorsed the continuation of bilingual programs with a list of eight aims, the first of which was 'To develop competency in English (reading and writing) and in mathematics to the level required on leaving school to function without</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Many bilingual schools struggled to deliver bicultural schooling for Aboriginal children in the NT. Three schools in the NT disbanded their programs.</td>
<td>Bianco (1987)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A key aim was for all policies, programs and projects, to be developed in consultation with Aboriginal people and their organisations at national and community levels.

The policy of the Commonwealth was based on what has been described as 'the fundamental right of Aboriginals to retain their racial identity and traditional lifestyle or, where desired, to adopt wholly or partially a European lifestyle'.

This policy acknowledged the need for the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to develop a more appropriate pedagogy.

Staff reductions and a decline in funding support for programs began to affect operations in bilingual schools from around 1984 onwards and the impact of reductions in funds was seen in the policy of many schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Main Outcome</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>National Policy on Languages (NALP)</td>
<td>The main objective of the policy was to outline the nation’s ‘choices about language issues’ in the context of Australia’s emergent multiculturalism. The policy covered all language-related activities in Australia, including policy specific to Indigenous languages. It recommended the development of the National Aboriginal Languages Project (NALP) to fund Indigenous language education programs and projects.</td>
<td>The main outcome of this policy was the provision of funding to community based Indigenous language programs. The Committee received substantial evidence about the National Indigenous Languages Policy. A common theme was that while stakeholders welcomed the announcement of the policy, there was little evidence that it was being fully implemented</td>
<td>Bianco (1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989 - 2004</td>
<td>National Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
<td>In 1989 the Federal Government implemented the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) and assumed responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.</td>
<td>The NAEP promoted involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in decision-making to promote equality of educational access, participation and outcomes. A 1996 review found an increased cultural respect in schools was still required (Cadzow, 2007). A further review in 2004 found while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the white societies were working closer together to improve educational outcomes, there were still areas that needed urgent attention if educational equality was to be achieved. It concluded the Aboriginal Education and Training Plan be established to address these concerns (Burridge &amp; Chodkiewicz, 2012).</td>
<td>MCEECDYA (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Australia’s Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy</td>
<td>The main objective of the policy was to outline a strategy to promote language and literacy in Australia. The policy emphasised the importance of competency in both English and Languages</td>
<td>The policy provided funding for Regional Aboriginal Language Centres and other organisations and also led to the establishment of the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and Culture (FATSILC)</td>
<td>Dawkins (1991)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998/1999</td>
<td>Policy shifts to lack of support for bilingual education.</td>
<td>Threats to withdraw funding to bilingual schools with a view to phasing out bilingual education programs. The Country Liberal Party made a decision to “…progressively withdraw the Bilingual Education program, allowing schools to share in the savings and better resource the English language programs (Collins and Lea, 1999). The new focus was for bilingual education programs to be phased out in favour of the further development of ESL programs. The move resulted in communities, teachers, linguists and educators rallying in defence of bilingual education, and a petition to Parliament with over 3,000 signatures. By the late 1990s there was a decline in the number of trained Indigenous teachers in schools generally, and in the number of teachers proficient in their traditional languages. A major reason for this was a reduction in training opportunities at the Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE), the main institution training Indigenous teachers. This was attributed to a lack of funding support for bilingual programs generally.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 1999 | Bilingual Education name change to 'Two-Way' learning. | The policy decision reached was that: with 'Two-Way' learning, local languages are used primarily as a means of teaching English literacy. A key difference was to track student attendance and their progress much more rigorously (Lugg, 2004, as cited in Devlin, 2011) The Collins review (1999) noted strong community support for bilingual education and gave qualified support to continuing it - albeit with the name change to ‘Two-Way’ learning. While the practice of schools did not change with the program name change, from 1998 to 2000 the number of government schools offering a bilingual education program reduced from sixteen to twelve schools. |

| | | Harris and Devlin (1999) |

| | | Harris and Devlin (1999) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-2003</td>
<td>National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS)</td>
<td>Launched by Prime Minister John Howard with the objective “To achieve literacy and numeracy for Indigenous students at levels comparable to those achieved by other young Australians” (Department of Education Science and Training, 2003, p5).</td>
<td>Commonwealh of Australia (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In a 2003 report it was found that a great majority of NIELNS initiatives had significantly improved on their baseline results. Improvements were attributed to four key areas. Student attendance was improved by providing school transport and by delivering food programs. These results were encouraging however a disproportionate number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were dropping out of high school or not continuing on to tertiary study, leading to social and economic disadvantage (Buckskin, 2009).</td>
<td>Buckskin (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Threats to dismantle bilingual programs in the NT</td>
<td>The Ramsey report (DEET and Ramsey 2003) entitled The Indigenous Languages and Culture in NT Schools Review laid the way to dismantling bilingual education programs in the Northern Territory. It challenged the educational reasons for supporting them on the grounds of reported concerns by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people about children's abilities to read and write in Standard Australian English (SAE), and doubts about the value of learning to read and write in traditional languages.</td>
<td>Ramsey (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>Two models of bilingual education implemented.</td>
<td>Two-Way Learning review process undertaken. Two models of bilingual education: the 'staircase' model and the dual early literacy model (or the '50/50' model) were implemented. Both models include the teaching of oracy and literacy in English and the Indigenous language. In 2004 two NT Government schools lost accreditation to provide the Two-Way program as they lacked staff and</td>
<td>Banks(2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Policy/Event</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Relevant Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005-2008</td>
<td>The Australia Directions In Indigenous Education endorsed a set of recommendations to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ engagement in schools</td>
<td>Syd Stirling, Minister for Education, announced in NT parliament (2005) that bilingual education was back on the government's agenda because it was recognised to be “an important teaching methodology” (Buckskin et al., 2009). A review in 2009 found that so long as there was adequate funding with the appropriate monitoring of execution, a long-term version of this model would be successful in closing this educational gap.</td>
<td>Buckskin, Hughes, Price, Rigney, Sarra, Adams &amp; Haywood (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>NTDET Education Policy</td>
<td>Inclusion of Aboriginal Pedagogy in formal curriculum. The NT Indigenous Education Strategic Plan 2006-2009, gave new assurances for the next five-year period: “Bilingual education is a formal model of dual language use where students' first language is used as a language for learning across the curriculum, while at the same time they are learning to use English as a second language for learning across the curriculum.” (NT DET 2008a)</td>
<td>Offered as a response to cultural erosion and loss of indigenous knowledge. There are 11 programs in ten Territory Government schools that use a bilingual model. The bilingual programs are effective overseas and give an indication of positive results in the Territory. NTDET will strengthen the bilingual program and improve its effectiveness and sustainability to deliver outcomes. NTDET policies apply to all schools, although teachers in most of these schools are not indigenous so the efficacy of such policies is expected to vary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Emergency Intervention in the Northern Territory</td>
<td>The Australian Government announced the NT Intervention - a ‘national emergency response to protect</td>
<td>The effects of this policy change for Aboriginal people is that it manages incomes, quarantines welfare payments, removes local employment opportunities and monitors school</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy/Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)</td>
<td>All students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. The first set of national skills test results (NAPLAN) are released in October 2008. NAPLAN assessments suggest that bilingual education, as it is practiced is not working.</td>
<td>Hughes &amp; Hughes (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2012</td>
<td>Four Hours of English Policy</td>
<td>NT Minister for Education and Training, Marion Scrymgour, announced that all schooling in Northern Territory schools was to be conducted in English only for the first four hours of every school day (Memorandum 2008/2527). A Northern Territory Government policy statement said there would be, &quot;Compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of each school day&quot; (NT DET, 2008c). NAPLAN Results informed the development of the Four Hours of English Policy. The reason for this policy shift was said to be the poor comparative performance of remote NT students on the national skills tests in 2008, particularly the scores obtained by students in schools with bilingual programs. Once the national results had been released on September 12th, the Government's response was forthright. The NT Chief Minister, Paul Henderson, deplored the results for the NT, explained that &quot;the worst cases came from remote schools&quot;. It was assumed that 'pretend bilingualism has resulted in generations of Aboriginal people who can't read and write (Hughes &amp; Hughes, 2009).</td>
<td>Hughes (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA): Close the Gap Campaign</td>
<td>Improving health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people by closing the gap in life expectancy, mortality rates and education outcomes. The NIRA captures the objectives, outcomes, outputs, performance measures and benchmarks that all governments have committed. Delivery of culturally appropriate education was emphasised as a priority for addressing indigenous disadvantage. Results to date are encouraging with an increase in school-community partnerships and an increased percentage of personal learning plans aiding in closing the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes (Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood, and Education Services Australia, 2013). Annual reports on Closing the Gap are released outlining progress on key indicators and details of outcomes for</td>
<td>Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood, and Education Services Australia (2013) Perso (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to achieving through the various national agreements and national partnership agreements to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage. The targets relating to Aboriginal education are to:</td>
<td>Aboriginal children are outlined in Chapter 1.</td>
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<td>• ensure access for all Indigenous four year olds to early childhood education by 2025;</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous students by 2018;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• halve the gap for Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous</td>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event/Policy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>In 2009 the Commonwealth Government announced a national Indigenous languages policy: Indigenous Languages – A National Approach.</td>
<td>The policy was a response to the NILS Report 2005, which found that the situation of Australia’s Indigenous languages was grave and required urgent action. In the policy announcement, the Government stated that it was committed to addressing the serious problem of language loss in Indigenous communities. There is an increased emphasis on working with languages to ‘Close the Gap’.</td>
<td>Office for the Arts (2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The Melbourne Declaration</td>
<td>The Melbourne Declaration sets the directions for Australian schooling for the ten-year period 2009–2018 as agreed to by all Australian education ministers. Goal one states: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence. Elaborating on this goal, all governments agreed to undertake a range of actions: The intent is to ensure that schools build on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning, and work in partnership with local communities on all aspects of the schooling process.</td>
<td>MCEETYA (2008)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Office for the Arts forms part of the Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport and is the lead agency responsible for implementing the Commonwealth Government's National Indigenous Languages Policy. It administers the Indigenous Languages Support (ILS) program, which ‘assists the maintenance, transmission and revival of Indigenous languages’

The ‘Measurement Framework’ for Schooling in Australia (2015) outlines processes for identifying performance indicators for Aboriginal children. The 2015 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (ATEISAP) indicates that a Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at or above the national minimum standard in reading, writing and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in NAPLAN testing (MCEEDCYA, 2015)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy Description</th>
<th>Key Goals</th>
<th>Source</th>
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</table>
| 2010  | National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy                   | 1. Involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision-making  
2. Equality of access to education services  
3. Equity of educational participation, and  
4. Equitable and appropriate educational outcomes | The National Policy formed the basis for co-operation and collaboration between educational institutions, states and territories, and the Commonwealth, in association with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. | Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2015) |
| 2010-2014 | The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan | A united approach between the Federal, State and Territory governments towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Its aims were to hasten the rate of improvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes so they receive “a high-quality, world-standard education to equip them for life in the 21st century”. The Plan aims for a holistic approach on a national, systematic and local level and has targets of providing early intervention to maximise learning outcomes | Maximisation of learning outcomes for Aboriginal children has not been achieved as educational inequalities persist, especially for those attending remote schools. | MCEECDYA & Education Services Australia, n.d. p3 |

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy/Initiative</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>National Curriculum</td>
<td>Emphasis placed on schools to localise content. The National Indigenous Languages Policy made statements linking Indigenous languages to literacy, numeracy and the National Curriculum. The Australian Curriculum: Languages is designed to enable all students to engage in learning a language in addition to English. The design of the Australian Curriculum: Languages recognises the features that languages share as well as the distinctiveness of specific languages. The overall rationale for learning Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages in Australian schools is that they are the original languages of this country. Through learning them, all students gain access to a richer, more culturally relevant education experience. Can prompt schools to take advantage of opportunities to localise curricula to more effectively meet student needs. The Australian Curriculum: Languages includes language-specific curricula for world languages and a Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages. Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages are fundamental to the identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and this is recognised throughout the Framework. It is also the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have access to education in and about their own languages, as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (resolution 61/295, adopted 13 September 2007),</td>
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ACARA (2013)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy Description</th>
<th>Relevant Issues</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Teacher Performance Pay Incentive Aims to ‘close the gap’ in education by improving teacher performance.</td>
<td>Focusing on improving teacher quality will not address the non-teacher related factors that affect learning outcomes.</td>
<td>Fryer (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Stronger Futures Policy The Stronger Futures legislation maintains key components of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act and includes bills such as the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill of 2011.</td>
<td>Many measures of the legislation maintain “racially-discriminatory” elements of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act and continue the control of the Australian Government over Aboriginal people and their lands. Persistent threats to withdraw funding to Two-Ways schools have caused much fear and distrust within local (NT) Aboriginal communities.</td>
<td>Moore (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Framework for Learning English as an Additional Language policy The Northern Territory’s Indigenous languages policy is embedded within its education policy.</td>
<td>If a child has English as an additional language there is a range of support available to ensure that they can access the curriculum.</td>
<td>NTDEET (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2017</td>
<td>English as a Second Language (NTDET) This policy applies to all Northern Territory Government schools, including independent public schools, who will implement Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) Learning Progression Phases. The policy affects schools where Indigenous language speaking students are for the most part in the majority, and</td>
<td></td>
<td>NT DoE (2015)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effective ESL programs</td>
<td>Programs that meet the language learning and educational needs of ESL students working within the Australian Curriculum.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Where a high degree of ESL pedagogical approaches and strategies are required for whole class settings. Many academics conclude we are now reaching the endgame of the separatist era in education policy. Integrationists argue that the self-determination era was wrong to be nurturing culture.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Integration Policy agenda</td>
<td>Forced Closure of Remote communities - ongoing threats of federal government to withdraw funding to remote communities.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Integration is seen by some as</td>
<td>the only way to end the 'cycle of despair' in remote communities. Sutton (2011) and other anti-separatists argue that a section of the Australian public believe that solutions to reducing inequality in education for Aboriginal people lie in integration.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Appendix 3: Ethics/Project Approval Letters

Initial Ethics Approval

Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia

Office of Research Services

Our Reference: 12025587 | H9994

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

15 January 2013

Associate Professor Kerry Robinson
School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Dear Kerry,

I wish to formally advise you that the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your research proposal H9994 “Remote Teaching: educators’ perceptions of factors affecting learning outcomes of Aboriginal students at Yipirinya School”, until 28 November 2014 with the provision of a progress report annually and a final report on completion.

Please quote the registration number and titled as indicated above in the subject line on all future correspondence related to this project.

This protocol covers the following researchers:
Kerry Robinson, Mary Hawkins, Elaha Barrett

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr Anne Abraham
Chair, Human Researcher Ethics Committee
School Council Approval

(Extract from letter on School letterhead)
Amendment Approval – 15 June 2017

Locked Bag 1787
Parramatta NSW 2151 Australia
Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI)

REDI Reference: H9964
Expiry Date: 31 August 2017

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

15 June 2017

Professor Andre Renzaho
School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Dear Andre,

RE: Amendment Request to H9964

I wish to formally advise you that the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your request to amend your approved research protocol H9964 "Understanding educators' perceptions of factors affecting learning outcomes of Aboriginal students in remote and urban contexts".

The approved amendments are:

Acceptance of adjusted methodology undertaken in 2014.


New supervisory team: Prof Andre Masumbuko Nzuruzu Renzaho
Dr Nichole Clair Georgeou
Dr Liddy Neville

Project specific approval conditions:
There are no specific conditions applicable.

Please quote the registration number and title as indicated above in the subject line on all future correspondence related to this project. All correspondence should be sent to the e-mail address humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au as this e-mail address is closely monitored.

Regards

[Signature]

Professor Elizabeth Deane

Presiding Member,
Human Researcher Ethics Committee
Western Sydney University
Amendment Approval – 25 June 2018

Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia
Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI)

REDI Reference: H9964
Expiry Date: 31 August 2017

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

25 June 2018

Professor Andre Renuah
School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Dear Andre,

RE: Amendment Request to H9964

I wish to formally advise you that the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your request to amend your approved research protocol H9964 “The Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children who Attend a ‘Two-Way’ Independent Separatist School in Remote Australia: A post-colonial case study”.

The approved amendments are:

Change of project title from “Understanding educators’ perceptions of factors affecting learning outcomes of Aboriginal-students in remote and urban contexts” to “The Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children who Attend a ‘Two-Way’ Independent Separatist School in Remote Australia: A post-colonial case study” to bring the title in line with the submitted thesis.

Project specific approval conditions: The title change is made to the ethics database post closure of the project.

Please quote the registration number and title as indicated above in the subject line on all future correspondence related to this project. All correspondence should be sent to the e-mail address humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au as this e-mail address is closely monitored.

Regards

[Signature]

Professor Elizabeth Deane

President, Human Research Ethics Committee
Western Sydney University
Appendix 4: Research Tools

Principal Information Sheet

**Project Title:** Remote Teaching: educators’ perceptions of factors affecting learning outcomes of Aboriginal students at [confidential information deleted] School.

I am currently undertaking a Doctoral Degree (PhD) at the University of Western Sydney under the supervision of Associate Professor Kerry Robinson (Principal supervisor) and Associate Professor Mary Hawkins, from the School of Social Sciences and Psychology. This doctoral research aims to identify educational strategies employed at [confidential information deleted] School in the Northern Territory to improve the learning outcomes and educational experiences of Aboriginal children enrolled at the school. It specifically explores teachers’ pedagogical strategies aimed at supporting Aboriginal students to achieve educational goals. The objectives of the research project are to identify how cultural influences, students’ and teachers’ attitudes and pedagogical practices, school curricula, assessment approaches, and schooling practices more generally, affect the learning outcomes and educational experiences of Aboriginal children in a remote Indigenous schooling context. Ethical clearance from the UWS Human Ethics Committee will be required prior to the commencement of the formal research program.

This is a brief overview of the research for the purpose of confirming interest of [confidential information deleted] School. A more detailed information package for teachers and members of the School Council including research approach and method, ethics approval, consent forms and interview schedule, will be provided prior to involvement in the project. Briefly, this qualitative research project will include spending 10 weeks at the School recording and observing classroom practices, interviewing educators, and potentially talking with other key figures relevant to the education of students at [confidential information deleted] School. The research will result in a thesis for my PhD research program and the thesis will be made available to all participants upon completion. It will also contribute to other professional publications aimed to increase an awareness of current approaches and strategies employed to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children.

If you would like more about the project please do not hesitate to contact me or my principal supervisor.
Sincerely,

Elisha Barrett  
Primary Researcher  
(P): 0421 874 102  
(E): elisha.barrett@uws.edu.au

Primary Supervisor  
Associate Professor Kerry Robinson  
(P): 02 97726574  
(E): k.robinson@uws.edu.au

Secondary Supervisor  
Associate Professor Mary Hawkins  
(P): 02 9772 6352  
(E): m.hawkins@uws.edu.au

University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00314)
Appendix 4: Research Tools

Project Information Sheet

I am currently undertaking a Doctoral Degree (PhD) at the University of Western Sydney under the supervision of Associate Professor Kerry Robinson (Principal supervisor) and Associate Professor Mary Hawkins, from the School of Social Sciences and Psychology. This doctoral research aims to identify educational strategies employed at [confidential information deleted] School in the Northern Territory to improve the learning outcomes and educational experiences of Aboriginal children enrolled at the school. It specifically explores teachers' pedagogical strategies aimed at supporting Aboriginal students to achieve educational goals. The objectives of the research project are to identify how cultural influences, students' and teachers' attitudes and pedagogical practices, school curricula, assessment approaches, and schooling practices more generally, affect the learning outcomes and educational experiences of Aboriginal children in a remote Indigenous schooling context. Ethical clearance from the UWS Human Ethics Committee will be required prior to the commencement of the formal research program.

This is a brief overview of the research for the purpose of confirming interest of [confidential information deleted] School. A more detailed information package for parents, teachers, and members of the School Council including research approach and method, ethics approval, and consent forms, will be provided prior to involvement in the project. Briefly, this qualitative research project will include spending time at [confidential information deleted] School recording and observing classroom practices, interviewing educators, and potentially talking with other key figures relevant to the education of Aboriginal children in these areas. The research will result in a thesis for my PhD research program and the thesis will be made available to all participants upon completion. It will also contribute to other professional publications aimed to increase an awareness of current approaches and strategies employed to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children.

This study is being sponsored by the University of Western Sydney and the researcher is funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Post Graduate Award.
This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Ethics Committee and the approval number is: H9964

If you have any complaints or reservations about the Ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the office of Research Services on 02 47360229 or email humanethics@uws.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you would like know more about the project please do not hesitate to contact me or my principal supervisor.

Sincerely,

Elisha Barrett
Primary Researcher
(P): 0421 874 102
(E): elisha.barrett@uws.edu.au

Primary Supervisor
(P): 02 97726574
Associate Professor Kerry Robinson (E): k.robinson@uws.edu.au
Participant Invitation

Participant Introduction Letter

Project Title: Remote Teaching: educators’ perceptions of factors affecting learning outcomes of Aboriginal students at [confidential information deleted] School.

Dear School staff,

I am currently undertaking a Doctoral Degree (PhD) at the University of Western Sydney under the supervision of Associate Professor Kerry Robinson (Principal supervisor) and Associate Professor Mary Hawkins, from the School of Social Sciences and Psychology. This doctoral research aims to identify educational strategies that educators at [confidential information deleted] employ to improve the learning outcomes and educational experiences of the Aboriginal students they teach. The research project will specifically explore the educational strategies that are utilised that are aimed at supporting Aboriginal students to achieve educational goals. The objectives of the research project are to identify how cultural influences, pedagogical practices, school curricula, assessment approaches, and schooling practices more generally, affect the learning outcomes and educational experiences of Aboriginal children in a remote Indigenous schooling context. Ethical clearance from the UWS Human Ethics Committee will be required prior to the commencement of the formal research program.

This is a brief overview of the research for the purpose of confirming your interest in participating in this research project. This qualitative research project will include spending time at [confidential information deleted] School recording and observing classroom practices, conducting interviews and potentially talking with other key figures relevant to the education of Aboriginal children in the local area. Interviews will be conducted in an informal setting. My aim is to understand participant’s opinions, thoughts, and beliefs on the research topic. I aim to record the interview (audio), and I will write notes throughout the course of the interview. All information obtained is regarded as strictly confidential and different names will be used and any identifying comments will be written in a manner that won’t identify persons. Observations of classroom and school activities will also be recorded in an effort to obtain information relevant to the aim of the research project. All participants will be informed when formal observations will commence and will be required to provide informed consent to participate in the observation process and in the interviews and research process more generally.
The research will result in a thesis for my PhD research program and the thesis will be made available to all participants upon completion. It will also contribute to other professional publications aimed to increase an awareness of current approaches and strategies employed to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children.

This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Ethics Committee and the approval number is: H9964

If you have any complaints or reservations about the Ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the office of Research Services on 02 47360229 or email humanethics@uws.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you would like know more about the project please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors or discuss it with the school principal.

Sincerely,

Elisha Barrett
Primary Researcher
(P): 0421 874 102
(E): elisha.barrett@uws.edu.au

Primary Supervisor
(P): 02 97726574
Associate Professor Kerry Robinson
(E): k.robinson@uws.edu.au
Interview Consent Form

UWS HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
Participant consent form

Project Title: Remote teaching: educators’ perceptions of factors affecting learning outcomes of Aboriginal students at [confidential information deleted] School

Please read the information sheet provided before signing this consent form.

A. I agree to be interviewed by Elisha Barrett as described in the information statement attached to this form.
   YES / NO

B. I acknowledge that I have read the information statement, which explains the aim of the interview and I have discussed any queries with the researcher.
   YES/NO

C. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about project have been answered to my satisfaction.
   YES/NO

D. I understand that I can withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty.
   YES/NO

E. I understand that I will not be identified in any way during and after the project and that all information I give will be completely confidential.
   YES / NO

F. I understand that all information I give to the project will be completely anonymous and will be destroyed after the project ends.
   YES / NO

G. I understand that if I have any questions relating to my participation in this interview, I may contact the researcher’s supervisor Kerry Robinson on: 02 9772 6574
   YES/NO

This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Ethics Committee and the approval number is: H9964

If you have any complaints or reservations about the Ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the office of Research Services on 02 47360229 or email humanethics@uws.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Interview Schedule

Topics to be covered:

1. What is your position at the school?
2. How many years have you been in this role?
3. Have you completed any formal training—if so where?
4. Did you know much about [confidential information deleted] before you started working here?
5. What are some of the reasons for why you wanted to come to [confidential information deleted]?
6. If you have had previous experience working at other schools, how is [confidential information deleted] different?
7. If you worked at other schools, how would you do things differently?
8. Do you participate in community activities in and outside the school? Is it comfortable for you to do so?
   - This ties into sense of self identity—are they comfortable in the community? Can they transcend the barriers associated with being an outsider?
9. What activities do students find most interesting?
10. What is working? What do you do?
11. Do you feel like there is much more to learn about the background of your students?
   - How much did you learn through your formal training?
12. What do you think about the Gonski review... and other education reform initiatives such as closing the gap? It is too abstract or do you understand what it all means for you as a teacher?
13. What do you think about the Australian curriculum?
14. If you are going to localise the content what does this mean?
15. How do you do this for your kids?
16. How do you rate a good day?
17. How do you cope after a bad day?

18. How do you get kids to school?

19. How do you manage student behavior?

20. What is the hardest thing about working here?

21. What’s the best thing about working here?

22. How do get parents involved?

23. Does the influence of families affect students?

24. What is your vision for self/students/ and the community?

25. Are there any questions you would like to ask me, or is there anything else you would like to say before interview is completed?

This study is being sponsored by the University of Western Sydney and the researcher is funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Post Graduate Award.

This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Ethics Committee and the approval number is: H9984

If you have any complaints or reservations about the Ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the office of Research Services on 02 47360229 or email humanities@uws.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

The information you provide will be completely anonymous. Thank you for participation in this study.

Elisha Barrett
Principal Researcher
Observation Consent Form

UWS HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
Participant consent form

Project Title: Remote teaching: educators' perceptions of factors affecting learning outcomes of Aboriginal students at [confidential information deleted] School.

A. I agree to be observed by Elisha Barrett as described in the information statement attached to this form.
   YES / NO

B. I understand that I can decline to be observed at any time without penalty.
   YES/NO

C. I understand that I will not be identified in any way during and after the project and that all written observational recordings will be completely confidential.
   YES / NO

D. I understand that all information collected pertaining to the project will be completely anonymous and will be destroyed after the project ends.
   YES / NO

Name: ..............................

Signed: ..............................

Date: ..............................