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To cite this article: John Guenther & Bill Fogarty (2018): Examining remote Australian First Nations boarding through capital theory lenses, Critical Studies in Education, DOI: [10.1080/17508487.2018.1543201](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2018.1543201)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2018.1543201>



Published online: 08 Nov 2018.



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# Examining remote Australian First Nations boarding through capital theory lenses

John Guenther <sup>a</sup> and Bill Fogarty<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Division of Higher Education and Research, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Darwin, Australia; <sup>b</sup>National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

## ABSTRACT

In Australia, boarding schools and residential facilities for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) students have long been part of the educational landscape. Policy settings are paying considerable attention to boarding schools and residential colleges as secondary schooling options for First Nations students, particularly for those from remote areas. Further, First Nations education is seeing increased investment in scholarship programmes, transition support services and establishment of national boarding standards.

There is an emerging body of qualitative evidence about the experiences and outcomes of boarding for remote First Nations students. However, in Australia there are no publicly available evaluations showing quantitative impacts of boarding.

In this paper, the authors critically examine boarding using three capital theory lenses: social/cultural capital (based on Bourdieu), human capital (based on Becker), and identity capital (based on Erikson). Using these lenses we intend to go beyond an understanding of impact on individuals towards a more nuanced consideration of the social, cultural, health and well-being consequences of pursuing boarding as strategic policy for First Nations students in Australia.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 April 2018

Accepted 25 October 2018

## KEYWORDS

Boarding schools; First Nations education; Human Capital Theory; social capital; identity capital

## Introduction

Over recent years much hope has been placed in the role of boarding schools to educate 'remote' First Nations<sup>1</sup> students in Australia. However, the question of whether that hope has been realised remains unanswered. Policies and strategies that encourage students to go to boarding schools have been effected through scholarship programmes, funding initiatives, withdrawal of remote secondary provision and support from proponents of boarding. The enthusiasm, however, is not backed by any substantial body of evidence.

In Australia, First Nations communities are characterised by a vast diversity of lifestyles and geographic locations, localised histories of engagement with non-Indigenous Australia, and a wide spectrum of aspirations for economic and community development. There are approximately 1000 discrete remote First Nations communities

in Australia. Many are small and isolated from main urban centres and are situated in the northern and central parts of the continent. These small townships are often referred to as 'remote communities'. As the term 'remote' suggests, these communities are distant from markets, employment opportunities, state services and infrastructure. However, it is equally true that for people in remote communities, it is the cities that are experienced as being distant and remote (Bulloch & Fogarty, 2016; Guenther, Halsey, & Osborne, 2015; Guenther, McRae-Williams, Osborne, & Williams, 2017).

Australian First Nation's education is a complex area of policy and development. Notwithstanding the sometimes extraordinary efforts of educators in remote communities, (see for example Devlin, Disbray, & Devlin, 2017 on the history of bilingual education), education for remote First Nation's students in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, has often been described with discourses of failure and disadvantage (Guenther, Bat, & Osborne, 2013). The 'solution' for this vexing 'policy problem' has been an incremental and deliberate move away from localised forms of educational development that acknowledge and include Indigenous wants and needs, towards mainstreaming and globalisation (Rizvi & Lingard, 2013). A focus on boarding school as an increasingly strong policy setting is a part of this broader ideological and policy framework. This has come despite the warnings of academic researchers about the potential language loss and social dislocation among remote boarders (Simpson, Caffery, & McConvell, 2009).

The argument for boarding presumes that provision of 'better' education in a boarding context can mitigate the socio-cultural and economic constraints of remote settings, thus producing individuals who demonstrate 'success' as measured by standardised educational data. Ultimately, such individuals will be productive, employed members of society and the economic return on the capital investment, made by both the individual and the state will be realised. Biddle (2010), while not specifically discussing boarding, argues that 'there are large economic benefits of education for the Indigenous population nationally, and for all location types' (p. 31).

Boarding has a strong rationale. It should create educational and career opportunities for young people. It should allow them to walk in 'two worlds' – one with western values and another with First Nations values. It should provide access to networks with benefits for individuals and communities. But does it do what it purports to? The purpose of this paper is to critique boarding through the lenses of human, social and identity capital theories. These theories all intersect in some way with education and in some cases overlap in their understandings. We believe these theories shed light on the assumptions driving provision of boarding for remote students. Having considered the theories, we conclude with a series of implications that may help reshape policy and practice – and future research – for the benefit of students, their families and their communities. First though, we turn to briefly unpack some of the contemporary literature on boarding in Australia.

### **Boarding schools for remote first nations students: current evidence**

Until recently, there was virtually no evidence on which policy advisors and boarding schools could base the development of strategic policy or practical responses to boarding provision. Historically in Australia and internationally, the reason that boarding and residential schools were so highly valued was the combination of education with

the physical separation from family, culture and language, which would supposedly then eradicate the ‘native ways’. The purposes for separate indigenous education were derived from an array of belief systems, some of which are inextricably bound up in Christianisation (Boarding Schools Healing Project, 2008; Partida, n.d.; Smith, 2009), paternalistic protectionism and absorption (Mander, 2012; Trafzer, Keller, & Sisquoc, 2006) and civilisation (Champagne & Abu-Saad, 2006; Stout, 2012), with elements of Social Darwinism (Jester, 2002; Walton, 1993) and eugenics (Trafzer et al., 2006) driving its development. We acknowledge that the history of residential schools in North America has been fraught and while there may be similarities, the contemporary debate in Australia is not the same as it is in Canada, where the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) has documented the shameful legacy of residential schools in light of past colonial policies.

More recently, calls for remote Australian First Nations boarding opportunities emanated from some sectors of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander community (ABC, 2013; Mundine, 2014), though opinions are divided (ABC, 2008). The boarding school debate escalated when Bruce Wilson, author of a *Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (Wilson, 2014) recommended boarding schools as the preferred option over secondary education provision in remote communities. Framed as a response to the ‘limited success’ of secondary schooling in remote communities, policy positions such as those found in the 2014 *Review*, propose that ‘secondary education for remote and very remote students should progressively be provided in urban schools ... with students accommodated in residential facilities’ (Wilson, 2014, p. 22). The most recent data on Year 12 completions for remote First Nations students shows that only one in five young people in very remote parts of the Northern Territory (compared with more than three in five from non-remote areas of Australia) have attained Year 12 or its equivalent (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2016). In keeping with idea that ‘quality’ education cannot be provided in remote contexts, Wilson proposed that high school provision should be incrementally delivered away from local contexts with ‘the expectation that within five years most students from these schools will attend urban schools from at least Year 9 onwards’ (Wilson, 2014, p. 158). It is important to note that First Nations education research was highly critical of the review (for example Fogarty, Lovell, & Dodson, 2015). Ensuing media attention prompted Benveniste, Disbray, and Guenther (2014) to conduct an analysis of media stories. They found four motives grouped under the following headings:

- (1) Government’s inability to provide secondary education in very remote locations
- (2) Choice for parents: Access to a good education
- (3) Better Opportunities for students: Building social capital
- (4) Practical reconciliation: A two-way exchange

Underpinning these motives were two main theoretical perspectives: Human Capital Theory (HCT) and Social Capital Theory. Since that report there has been a mini-explosion of new research that highlights boarding school issues related to remote First Nations students. Most of the research is qualitative, reporting on the risks and challenges of boarding in social, psychological and emotional terms (Benveniste, Dawson, & Rainbird, 2015; Benveniste, Guenther, Dawson, & Rainbird, 2014, 2015; Mander, Cohen, & Pooley, 2015a, 2015b; Mander, Lester, & Cross, 2015; O’Byrne, 2016; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017) not

just for the students, but for parents and community members as well (Benveniste, Dawson, Guenther, Rainbird, & King, 2016; Mander, 2015). The emerging body of research does not include quantitative findings about the effectiveness of boarding in terms of academic outcomes, or retention, or pathways from education. There are no public evaluations of scholarship programmes. There is no evidence of the economic benefit to communities. What we do know from the limited publicly available quantitative data is that there are not enough boarding places to cater for all remote students, and with an increase in demand of more than 40 per cent in recent years (Commonwealth of Australia, & Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017) up to two-thirds of students are either not ready for boarding or come back to communities to disengage from education altogether (Guenther et al., 2016). Further, some students enter what the recent *Power of Education* Report calls a ‘revolving door’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017, p. 116) of one boarding school experience after another. Risks of sexual abuse in boarding schools are also noted by the report of the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).

However, there has been no serious attempt to theorise the changes resulting from boarding and there has been no attempt to theorise the foundations of boarding programmes. To a large extent the emerging qualitative evidence on boarding avoids any detailed discussion on its underpinning philosophical and theoretical foundations. Rather it takes boarding as a given. What we are trying to do in this paper is check whether the empirical evidence does line up with theory – in this case three ‘capital’ theories. The data we draw on for this paper is the extant evidence from published peer reviewed articles and theses.

### Three capital theories

Our theorisation of boarding uses capital theory lenses through which to view boarding provision for remote First Nations students. While we could use other theoretical lenses (for example various critical theories, standpoint theories or post-structural theories), we have chosen ‘capitals’ to test and challenge the propositions of boarding proponents outlined above. In particular, we acknowledge that a weakness of the ‘capitals’ approach is that it fails to recognise or unpack perspectives from an Indigenous Standpoint and that there would be considerable worth in critiquing boarding from that position. Our analysis is not absolute but we suggest that as part of a broader hegemonic education system, capital theories offer some explanation of why boarding is how it is, and why policy in this area has developed as it has. HCT (drawing on Becker) is explored to consider the proposition that investment in boarding has a payoff. Social Capital Theory (drawing on Bourdieu) considers the proposition that the networks boarding exposes students to will be of benefit to them. Identity Capital Theory (drawing first on Erikson and then on Coté) unpacks the proposition that boarding helps shape young identities for productive adulthoods. We first explain the theories, discussing their relevance to boarding. Later, we critique the consequences of the theories for policy and practice.

### Human Capital Theory

The concept of human capital can be traced back to the eighteenth century economist, Adam Smith, who described ‘acquired abilities’ as an investment that costs the

individual but which ‘repays that expence with a profit’ (Smith, 1904, p. II.1.17). More recently this idea was applied to economics in the early 1960s through scholars such as Schultz and Becker (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). These economists argued that individuals make choices about education based on the economic return from their investment in knowledge. Becker put forward models that calculated the likely return of staying in school. In short, the longer an individual stays in education the greater the return on investment. Of course, the modelling depends on the rationality of certain types of choices. The logic of making decisions depends to some extent on the prevailing culture in which individuals find themselves – a point we return to later.

Seen through the HCT lens, the driving rationale for education and training is the imperative of generating income and increasing labour market productivity (Tan, 2014), ultimately for economic growth (Keeley, 2007). The dominance of this perspective means it is not surprising to hear messages from politicians like: ‘A good education can lead to a good job and financial stability for individuals and their families, as well as a better future for the community’ (Scullion, 2015). Boarding then is intended to instil values aligned to western understandings of success in terms of individual wealth, productivity and career aspirations, regardless of any other benefit that individuals or communities can derive from learning, whether at school or beyond. It does so by separating students from First Nations communities who consistently reject some of these axiological and ontological assumptions of success.

### ***Social capital***

The idea that people gain value from their network of social relationships is not new. However, theorisation of ‘social capital’ is relatively new and post-dates theorisation of human capital. According to Portes (1998), Glenn Loury’s 1977 critique of neoclassical theories of racial income inequality is the first to use the term ‘social capital’. Granovetter’s work on the strength of weak ties, which he describes as a ‘fragment of theory’ (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1378) is another precursor to theorising on social capital. However, Portes suggests that Pierre Bourdieu was the first to theorise social capital. Bourdieu brought together concepts of economic, social and cultural capital. He defines social capital as:

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248-249)

For our purposes, this is significant as it suggests that social and cultural capital can be bought – an economic investment may allow individuals to access the wealth associated with social structures otherwise not accessible. However, while arguing for the convertibility of various forms of capital, Bourdieu asserts that the group acts to protect its ‘accumulation of the capital which is the basis of the group’ (p. 251). We see these apparently opposing dynamics working in the context of boarding scholarships. Scholarships are an attempt to buy the cultural and social capital inherent in the institutions of boarding schools, particularly elite schools. However, the social groups

of home community and boarding school will act to protect their accumulated capitals, which inhibits the exchange that would otherwise allow the student from the community to 'walk in two worlds'.

Coleman argues that 'social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors' and notes that 'A given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others' (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). Portes and Landolt (1996) pick up on this idea in their discussion about the downside of social capital, as a counter to the growing popularity of social capital as a cure for social ills and the apparent decline of 'community' (Putnam, 2000).

Woolcock (2001), consistent with Bourdieu, argues that 'social capital' links between disciplinary, sectorial and methodological divides and at its best:

Recognises that exclusion from economic and political institutions is created and maintained by powerful vested interests, but that marginalised groups themselves possess unique social resources that can be used as a basis for overcoming exclusion, and as a mechanism for helping forge access to these institutions. (p.16)

Our observation from years of work in remote communities suggests that this rarely happens. What boarding schools should do, as Woolcock suggests elsewhere (see Woolcock, 1998), is to build 'linking ties' to facilitate access to the more powerful, hegemonic structures that would see greater power and leverage coming back to communities for self-determined outcomes. We remain doubtful that this hope will be realised, because – as Bourdieu and Woolcock suggest – the bonding ties maintain control of the institutions and structures which hold the power to effect change.

### ***Identity capital***

At the very point where, as Erikson (1968) suggests, adolescence creates 'identity confusion' remote First Nations students attending boarding schools find themselves dislocated from their home context, where their identities are considered 'normal'. Identity can be thought simply as an expression of 'who I am'. But what shapes this 'self' comes from within – psychologically – and from those around us – sociologically and anthropologically. Erikson in *Identity and the Life Cycle* (Erikson, 1980) distinguishes between, 'ego identity', 'personal identity' and 'group identity'. These three classifications roughly align with the psychological, sociological anthropological views. In the case of 'group identity' historical and cultural roots are embedded in an individual's identity. Writing in the 1950s, Erikson (1980, p. 20) illustrated the concept with an example from Sioux culture in which he notes that in such an identity, 'the prehistoric past is a powerful psychological reality'. He describes the 'ego identity' as a learned sense of self that is 'developing into a defined ego within a social reality' (p. 22). The young person from a remote community going to boarding school faces the same dilemma as the young person from Sioux culture. Having built an ego identity and group identity from living 13 years in a remote community, all of what he or she knows to be true can be challenged by alternative youth identities and alternative group identities.

Erikson did not talk about identity 'capital', though his theories are important for our understanding of identity in the context of learning. Côté and Levine (2002) draw heavily on Erikson to develop a theory of identity capital. Their short definition is as



follows: ‘the term “identity capital” denotes “investments” individuals make, and have, in “who they are.” These investments potentially reap future dividends in the “identity markets” of late modern communities’ (Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 147). Importantly, in their explanation of identity capital, Côté and Levine show how this form of capital intersects with others through concepts of self, society and life-course structuring (Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 163). We accept that identity capital develops as a result of phases of human development where individuals distinguish ‘the systems of value, beliefs ... group affiliations, leisure time pursuits, as well as intellectual and aesthetic preferences’ (Côté, 2005, p. 225) with which they identify.

## **Capital theories in the context of boarding strategies and policies**

In this section of the paper we critically examine each of the three forms of capital outlined above, with a view to their application in the context of boarding schools for remote First Nations students. In so doing, it becomes clear that there is a palpable need for some basic economic modelling on boarding for Indigenous students. There must also be a concomitant exploration of ‘difference’ for remote First Nations students and a challenge to economic assumptions underpinning arguments for boarding provision.

### ***Human capital***

As noted earlier, HCT argues that individuals make decisions about education based on the economic return from their investment in knowledge. In the First Nations education field, there is a strand of research that challenges, or at least questions, a linear relationship between investment in education by the individual and the state and economic gain or return. For example, Biddle (2010) argues that although the ‘potential economic benefits of education can be high in remote areas, relative to Indigenous Australians in non-remote areas the social benefits appear to be somewhat lower’. Furthermore, Biddle’s research finds that the financial costs of education are also likely to be relatively high, especially in terms of late secondary and post-school education.

A study by Guenther, Milgate, O’Beirne, and Osborne (2014) reports what students and families themselves say about their vision and expectations of their future, how they see success and how they view their experiences of school. The study finds that assumptions about Human Capital and the importance of investment choices in education by non-local participants in the study were generally not shared by locals: ‘Less than three per cent of all comments in the data related to a future orientation’ (Guenther et al., 2014, p. 11). This may reflect the different norms and values that are expressed in First Nations and non-Indigenous communities.

So, what does this mean for remote students in boarding schools? While a ‘good’ education may provide access to better employment opportunities, higher remuneration and greater capital wealth accumulation, it cannot be assumed that these will necessarily be drivers for individuals from remote communities (Bulloch & Fogarty, 2016). Indeed, participation in boarding school education may present too great an ‘opportunity cost’ in terms of lost social relatedness and social capital accumulation (see below). It may also be that even where people actively choose a boarding education, the return on investment



may be viewed as a communal benefit to the social organisation of communities rather than individual gain. However, given the paucity of data, lack of economic modelling or research and evaluation in the provision of boarding education, it is currently difficult to know. What we do know is that attrition rates for remote Indigenous students who participate in mainstream boarding programmes is very high – a ‘revolving door’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017, p. 117) – with as many as two-thirds of all remote students either not meeting entry eligibility criteria or returning without completing a full year (Guenther, et al., 2016). This suggests the need to better understand the way in which HCT and the policy assumptions it produces are actualised for remote First Nations students. Before we can achieve this, however, some basic economic modelling and research data is required. Similarly, an understanding of social and net economic impacts of taking students out of a community is needed, as is an understanding of benefits or otherwise accrued by individuals and/or communities if and when they return. Here we see parallels with similar dynamics in rural communities where the inevitability of leaving for education leads to what Corbett (2015) describes as ‘population implosion’ (p. 12) with compromised social and economic consequences for communities. Carr and Kefalas (2009) refer to this as a ‘brain drain’, a loss of human capital. While we are careful not to say that the North American rural contexts Corbett, Carr and Kefalas talk about are the same as remote Australian First Nations communities, there clearly are similarities that warrant examination. Political rhetoric often fails to see these nuances. For example, Hon Nigel Scullion, Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs has different views. He states that the ‘The evidence of education and, as a consequence, employment outcomes achieved by indigenous children who attend boarding schools is indisputable’ (Martin, 2014). We are less convinced.

### ***Social capital***

Continuing our analysis of remote First Nations boarding through a theorising of capitals, we move now to the concept of social capital. One of the key benefits expounded by advocates of mainstream boarding school programmes is the promise of an increase in social capital viewed as mainstream networks giving access to power, influence and resources (see for example Benveniste et al., 2014). Over the last two decades, both domestically and internationally, frameworks of social capital development are being offered as an antidote to indicators of disadvantage and as a policy solution to poverty (see as discussed earlier, Woolcock, 1998). However, the generic and uncritical use of social capital frameworks in policy development for First Nations Australians may have problematic outcomes.

By characterising groups or communities as being rich or poor in social capital, a distributional approach (Green, Preston, & Sabates, 2003) essentialises relational property and mystifies the class and power aspect of that property. In so doing a network of interaction between people becomes commoditised as a distributional problem. Issues of class, power, race and gender are thus hidden from the policy gaze and the solution to inequities can become as simple as ‘these people don’t have enough, or the wrong type of, social capital. We need to build more social capital’. In this way, an overemphasis of the functional features of social properties, such as trust and

reciprocity, allows for ahistorical, decontextualised policy development. This becomes particularly important when analysing remote First Nations boarding.

There is a propensity of mainstream boarding options to essentialise the ‘good’ social capital outcomes available to participants. Often these are expressed as opportunities to access networks of power, influence and financial resources outside of the local community. In turn these networks are supposed to enable leverage of benefit for the individual. Indeed, the research base recognises the potential social capital benefits of boarding school (Bass, 2014; Benveniste et al., 2015; Curto and Fryer Jr, 2014) which may include:

- Higher levels of school attainment in comparison to peers
- Access to new circles of friends, acquaintances and networks
- Immersion in Standard Australian English and a literate academic environment potentially helping students to achieve at a senior secondary level
- Health and well-being outcomes, including health screening, and nutrition and health
- Education as a function of environment and differing social norms.
- Better access to employment opportunities through relational networks
- Opportunity to participate in a wider array of extra-curricular activities
- Exposure to wider post schooling options.

However, our earlier point regarding a lack of evidence for remote Australian First Nations students remains. We cannot be sure to what extent these potential social capital benefits are being attained. More worrying though, is an under-researching of the potential effects on individual and communal based forms of social capital as pre-existent in the communities from which remote boarding students come. Viewed through an economic lens, simple delineations of social capital are inherently ambiguous and if social networks are to be presented as capital, economic principles of supply and demand, opportunity cost and diminishing returns need consideration. In particular, there is potential that lack of supply of education (rather than demand for new forms of social capital) may be a key driver in what Mander (2012) terms the ‘choiceless choice’ remote parents face in sending children to boarding schools. Similarly, current research (Guenther, et al., 2016; Mander, et al., 2015b; O’Bryan, 2016; Rogers, 2017) suggests that a major factor in anecdotally high attrition rates of First Nations boarding school students may be the opportunity cost to an individual’s accumulation of social capital in home communities.

Further, Social Capital Theory asserts that this form of capital is both individuated and communal (Ledogar & Fleming, 2008, p. 16). This begs the question, what is the opportunity cost to remote Indigenous communities, as distinct from the individual, when families send their children to boarding schools? Contemporary ethnographic research suggests that the cost can be high to local communities. Some of the costs cited in the literature include:

- A loss of capable individuals to local socio-political organisation
- Disruption to intergenerational transfer of Indigenous knowledge

- Reductions in funding to local educational institutions by government in favour of mainstream boarding or private boarding institutions
- Disruption to cultural norms of social relatedness
- Disruption to internal economic forms of distribution
- Loss of language
- Emotional distress to families
- Potential for long-term psychological and emotional damage to the individual and the community (Duffell & Basset, 2016)

Portes and Landolt (1996), Woolcock (1998) and others (see systematic review: Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017) expound both the negative and positive consequences of social networks. Statements in public discourse, if not always explicitly in policy, often cast the ‘bonding’ forms of social capital found in First Nations communities as antithetical to the pursuit of education and or standard forms economic development. Further, for many students entering boarding, processes of exclusion and racism work against access to the networks young people need in order to get ahead (Benveniste et al., 2015; Mander, Cohen, & Pooley, 2015b; O’Bryan, 2016)

### *Identity capital*

For young people transitioning from community to boarding schools, the challenges to their ego identity are enormous. On leaving, the cultural and identity frames of reference which they had come to know suddenly vanish and are replaced with an alien set of frames which require a shift in personal identity. The evidence suggests that for many students these challenges are too great, which is perhaps why a large number return to their communities well before the end of year 12, and possibly well before the end of their first year of secondary school. For students coming from a largely collectivist society, moving into an individualistic structure, notions of choice, innovation and self-investment may be contrary to the norms and values expected in First Nations cultures, leading not only to identity confusion but crisis, reflected in mental ill-health – there is evidence to suggest these outcomes occur reasonably often (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Mander et al., 2015, 2015a; b; O’Bryan, 2016; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017).

While many parents from remote communities choose to send their children away from communities for secondary education, the evidence suggests that this should not be at the expense of their identities, connected to their language, Country, kinship and law (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2015, 2016). While the quest for ‘both ways’ education is often expressed as a hope, the ability to ‘walk in two worlds’ or ‘orbit’ (ABC, 2016; Benveniste et al., 2015; Burin, 2017; Hunter, 2015; Pearson, 2005) is often not realised or leads to compromises, such that the young person must make choices about which world he or she belongs in (Mander, et al., 2015b; McCalman et al., 2016; O’Bryan, 2016). Students returning to communities may be exposed to ‘lateral violence’ from peers who did not go (Commonwealth of Australia, & Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017; O’Bryan, 2016). Indeed, there is evidence in the research literature to suggest that the transition experiences of young people into boarding schools are fraught (Bobongie, 2017).

Given what we know about the potential pitfalls of boarding for student identity, we can see identity tensions arising for remote students who are on the one hand raised to embody a collectivist sense of self, with connection, obligation and interdependence at the core of identity, and on the other being taught that to be successful one must be independent, make individual choices and invest in self. These tensions are exacerbated by the normal identity struggles that adolescents experience either as ‘crisis’ or ‘confusion’ (Erikson, 1968, 1980). The opportunity to build identity capital during the vulnerable years of boarding may therefore be thwarted for many young people. While attempts are made to smooth the transition process, the fundamental problems that boarding brings for young people – cultural dislocation, family disconnection, experiences of racism and inability to express thoughts in language – remain and are very difficult to ameliorate.

## Summary

In summary, we offer Table 1 as a way of bringing the various threads of our arguments together. We propose that while the rationales for boarding, built around the three capitals, should work, they often do not work the way they are meant to. While we acknowledge the potential for benefit, what we highlight here is the potential for cost and loss from participation in boarding schools. Given this, the implications for strategic policy are profound. The possibilities for harm cannot simply be glossed over. We suggest that assumptions of the capital theories are so strongly embedded in policy paradigms that evidence is ignored in favour of the hope of what should be. We believe our critique of the theories and the evidence is sufficient to take stock of policy in this area and consider alternatives, which do provide tangible benefits to First Nations students and their communities.

**Table 1.** Summary of expected and potential outcomes of adopting capitals approaches.

Capital	How it should work for remote students attending boarding schools	How it can work (based on the evidence)
Human Capital Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals make a choice to invest in their education because of the perceived and actual return on the investment</li> <li>• Communities benefit through increased productivity</li> <li>• Education leads to improved employment pathways and higher income</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals may perceive a net cost to education and therefore choose not to invest</li> <li>• Communities may lose human capital if students choose not to return to communities</li> <li>• Pathways from education and training to work may be avoided in favour of alternative livelihood options</li> <li>• Income benefit may not materialise</li> </ul>
Social Capital Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in social capital gives access to wealth through social structures</li> <li>• Communities strengthen through links to external sources of power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification with powerful social structures may lead to exclusion from community power structures and lateral violence</li> <li>• External sources of power act to protect and control resources to the exclusion of communities</li> <li>• Lost opportunities to engage in the local cultural economy</li> </ul>
Identity Capital Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in identity capital affirms role development consistent with ontologies associated with schooling</li> <li>• Agency/choice/self-investment leads to improved health and well-being outcomes</li> <li>• Students become confident walking in ‘two worlds’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conformity to educational identity expectations/aspirations may lead to identity confusion/crisis</li> <li>• Conflicting identities may lead to ill-health and loss of cultural identity</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

In 2014, the Honourable Nigel Scullion (Minister for Indigenous Affairs), stated: ‘there are clear benefits for children attending senior schooling away from their home base and the pressures that can negatively impact on schooling’ (Martin, 2014). While this may be true – and there are success stories of students who have done well – essentialising the complexities of remote community social capital fails to account for the intercultural nature of exchange between individual, community and institution. It also fails to allow the possibilities presented by a state apparatus which could enable local educational development. Scullion, in the same article is then quoted: ‘The evidence of education and, as a consequence, employment outcomes achieved by indigenous children who attend boarding schools is indisputable’. The problem with this statement is that there is no research evidence base on which to make this claim, and as we have shown, based on the evidence that is available, the outcomes of boarding schools are at best mixed. In the rush to move children out of community to get them a ‘good’ education there is a concomitant risk that we may miss the potential educational opportunities that may be found in expressions of Indigeneity, cultural practice and the pursuit of alternate economic forms already existing in home communities. Further, we may be exposing students to foreseeable and avoidable risks by placing them in positions of vulnerability. Systems and resources must be put in place to ensure that those risks are mitigated and minimised.

We have noted in our discussion of the three ‘capitals’ that while there may be good reason for *believing* in these as a foundation for education and boarding schools more generally, we have no *evidence* to support the propositions these theories make in general. What we have is considerable evidence to suggest that there are problems associated with the assumptions these theories bring to boarding school strategic policy. Our critique offers those ‘believers’ an opportunity to critically examine the motivations for and the outcomes from boarding for remote students from First Nations communities. While there is good intention among policy advisors, boarding and scholarship providers, a concerted effort to increase numbers progressing to year 12 via boarding must recognise that for every favourable outcome, there are probably many ethically questionable outcomes, which need considering. Our critique may also act as a prompt for targeted research that addresses the many questions left unanswered by the evidence gaps.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Note

1. We use the term ‘First Nations’ in this paper to describe people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage in Australia, recognising that there is considerable diversity across communities and Nations. They are not an homogenous ‘Indigenous’ group. Our use of the term should not be confused with its use in other parts of the world, for example in North America.

## Notes on contributors

**John Guenther** is currently the Research Leader – Education and Training for Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, based in Darwin. His work focuses on learning contexts, theory and practice and policies as they connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

**Bill Fogarty** is currently the A/C Deputy Director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the ANU in Canberra. He has a long history of research and work in Indigenous Education and is currently a Chief Investigator on a number of large research projects including the Australian Research Council funded ‘Deficit Discourse and Indigenous Education’ project.

## ORCID

John Guenther  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0080-1698>

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