



Thriving in Two Worlds? - Identity and Academic Efficacy: Yarning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students Studying on Scholarships at Independent Australian Boarding Schools

Abstract

In Australia today, around 2,350 young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote, rural, and regional communities are enrolled on scholarships in traditional, urban, independent boarding schools. These scholarships are supported by independent boarding schools and organisations such as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, Yalari, and the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program. Many of these students have transitioned in Year 7 from membership of the majority ethnic-racial-cultural population to become members of a minority group within an often-conservative Eurocentric cultural community. 250 years after invasion and colonisation, during which time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have faced eradication, dispossession, relocation, segregation, assimilation, integration and, most recently, reconciliation, where on this continuum do these young people find themselves? Are these scholarship programs simply assimilation by stealth? Is it possible for these young people to engage in the primary purpose of adolescence, to explore and establish their sense of identity, including their ethnic-racial-cultural identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or must they forgo this in order to develop the academic self-efficacy needed to succeed as scholars in the boarding school communities in which they find themselves? Utilisation of a systematic quantitative literature review process found a gap in the knowledge as illustrated by the questions above that this project therefore seeks to fill.

These questions were interrogated through the engagement of an Indigenist qualitative methodology, Yarning, within a context of a constructivist grounded theory framework. This methodology was employed as it provided a vehicle for the research project that is respectful, responsible, and accountable of and to the young people who agreed to contribute their experiences and stories, allowing for the emergence of knowledge from the voices of the participants rather than via a priori hypothesis. A deliberate decision was made to privilege the voices of the young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, seeking to understand their boarding school journey through their lens, particularly in relation to their developing racial-ethnic-cultural identities and their academic self-efficacy. Yarning provides for loosely structured, in-depth conversations guided by the facilitator but driven by the individual and group participants. Thematic analysis of the Yarning conversations held over a 1-week period while participating in the Yalari Biennial Cherbourg Memorial Walk uncovered a number of themes and, through these, a number of findings.

Within the overarching context of boarding were identified four themes: (a) Culture, with sub-themes of Belonging and community, Cultural differences, Cultural ignorance, Kinship, Language, and Regard; (b) Academic Self-Efficacy with sub-themes of Expectations and Inequity; (c) Identity, with sub-themes of Foreclosure, Exploration, Moratorium, Achievement, Bicultural integration, Commitment, Fitting in, and Living in two worlds; and (d) Experiences of Racism with sub-themes of Crabs in the bucket, Stereotype, and Tokenism.



The student participants were confident, intelligent, and eloquent young people, proud of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian heritage and, while recognising the challenges they encountered, were on a clear trajectory towards achievement of their racial-ethnic-cultural identity and educational success. Through the Yarning conversations, these young people have indicated their affinity with dimensions of racial-ethnic-cultural identity described by Indigenous Australian researchers. They are overcoming challenges and obstacles – social, relational, academic, and personal – to balance their sense of identity with a developing academic self-efficacy. They have been challenged by racist behaviours – intentional and unintentional, overt, covert, and casual. Some have faced conflict in their home communities with the breakdown of friendships resulting from their choices to move to “the city” for a boarding school education that they perceived as being of greater benefit than what was on offer in their communities. Most have learnt to live comfortably in two worlds as young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians without compromising their cultural values or their academic pursuits. Others continue to navigate this journey.

Opportunities for the schools that support these scholarship programs are also identified. These schools have made a commitment to providing a highly efficacious educational experience for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote, regional, and rural communities. Through reflecting on the experiences and stories of these students, these partner schools and, possibly, schools considering participation in one of these scholarship programs, can continue to evolve and improve their pedagogy and residential boarding practice.