

Experiencing Wiltja!

The experiences of Indigenous young people participating in the Wiltja residential program, and identifying strategies for improving their well-being, participation, retention and success in the program

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Executive summary

The Experiencing Wiltja! project responded to an identified need for research that has the potential to improve educational and employment outcomes for young Aboriginal people, particularly those from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of South Australia.

The aims of this project were to enhance the social and emotional well-being of young Indigenous people, as well as their future career pathways, through exploring their perceptions and experiences of moving to Adelaide through engagement in the Wiltja program, and identifying key factors that influence their decision-making, as well as gaining new understanding about the role of initiatives such as leadership development, mentoring and safe use of social media in building social and cultural capital, through social networking. A related project, *Palya-Net: Technologies for Socially Inclusive Communities* (Wood et al, in press) has focused more specifically on involving young people in the co-creation of an online platform addressing the development of participants' skills in the safe use of social media to build social and cultural capital.

We adopted a grounded approach to gathering and coding the data obtained from interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders, which will inform ongoing research employing participatory action research (PAR). We have adopted this grounded approach and PAR to be consistent with the principles of Indigenist research, which is undertaken in response to identified needs and involves an action oriented approach that contributes to change for those who are participating as well as their communities.

We acknowledged at the outset that in undertaking this research we are non-Indigenous researchers and therefore made no claims that we employed decolonizing methodologies, only that our approach is consistent with Indigenist methodologies and seeks through the PAR approach to respect participants as co-researchers and experts who can inform and guide the research, while also benefiting from their participation.

We obtained ethical clearance from both the University of South Australia Human Ethics Committee and the Department for Community and Child Development. Research undertaken at Wiltja posed minimal safety risks to participants and researchers as the data was collected at Wiltja by trained researchers under the supervision of the Chief Investigators (CIs). All research conducted on the APY Lands adhered to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Participants were recruited from five stakeholder groups: 1) current Wiltja students; 2) graduates of Wiltja; 3) former students who did not graduate from Wiltja; 4) families and friends of participants; and 5) other education stakeholders. A total of 15 current students participated in focus groups. The second group of participants comprised past students of the Wiltja program who had graduated. A total of 5 former graduates were interviewed (3 participated in the session in the APY Lands and 2 at Wiltja); the third group of participants comprised past students of Wiltja who did not graduate. A total of 3 former students of Wiltja who did not graduate were interviewed (2 interviewed in the APY Lands and one in Adelaide). The fourth group of participants were Wiltja staff. A total of 8 Wiltja staff participated in focus group sessions conducted at Wiltja. The final group of research participants included people with a key stakeholder interest in the Wiltja program, such as current and past teachers in the APY Lands, administrative or other staff involved in the Wiltja program, families of past and present Wiltja students, community members from

students' home communities of origin. A total of 17 key stakeholders were interviewed in the APY Lands.

We adopted a grounded approach to coding the data, which revealed the following themes:

- Motivations for attending Wiltja
- Transition to Wiltja
- Social Connectedness
- Perseverance
- Rules and Independence
- Benefits of attending Wiltja
- Governance

These themes are explored in detail in this report and highlight some tensions and contradictions for students navigating between two vastly different cultural contexts.

The final section proposes a way forward employing a participatory approach to constructively working with all stakeholders, identifying contradictions and exploring areas for 'expansive learning'.

We conclude by acknowledging as 'outsiders' that we make no claim to represent the voices of Indigenous people, but rather we hope that through this research we have gone some way towards opening up the opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to work constructively to bring about transformative change.

1. Introduction

The *Experiencing Wiltja!* project responded to an identified need for research that has the potential to improve educational and employment outcomes for young Aboriginal people, particularly those from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of South Australia, a vast Aboriginal controlled area in the far north west of South Australia, who experience significant disadvantage due to lack of basic infrastructure and access to education and employment opportunities. The project specifically aimed to identify some of the factors influencing young people's experiences of Wiltja; a program for secondary students from the APY Lands, established initially at Ingle Farm, then Woodville High School (WHS) some 23 years ago, and most recently at Windsor Gardens Vocational College (WGVC), with the establishment of a senior campus in 2010. Students from the APY Lands board at Northgate in metropolitan South Australia and participate in a range of recreational and educational programs while attending either WHS or WGVC for their education.

The overall aims of this project were to enhance the social and emotional well-being of Indigenous young people, as well as their future career pathways, through exploring their perceptions and experiences of moving to Adelaide through engagement in the Wiltja program, and identifying key factors that influence their decision-making, as well as gaining new understanding about the role of initiatives such as leadership development, mentoring and safe use of social media in building social and cultural capital, through social networking. A related project, *Palya-Net: Technologies for Socially Inclusive Communities* (Wood et al, in press) has focused more specifically on involving young people in the co-creation of an online platform addressing the development of participants' skills in the safe use of social media to build social and cultural capital.

The project adopted a transformative participatory approach to the research, recognising the 'diverse and contested nature of various definitions and interpretations of 'capacity building' [and the need] for cautious and informed application in any Indigenous Australian community context' (Taylor, 2003). In adopting a participatory research approach, the aims and objectives for this research were developed in consultation with Wiltja Residential Program and the Office for Youth (OfY) who were partners in the Young and Well CRC, members of the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC), and Indigenous men and women who had personal experience of the Wiltja program with the aim of: understanding and giving voice to the stories of the experiences of the Wiltja residential program; identifying factors influencing their experience of the Wiltja program including links to home, family, peers and friendship networks; identifying factors that may help to increase retention; improving social and emotional well-being; retaining the cultural identity of Indigenous young people and helping to keep connection to culture, identity and community strong while based in Adelaide.

The specific objectives for this research were to:

- explore the factors influencing Indigenous young people's experience of the Wiltja residential program including participation, retention and potential for program enhancements;
- identify strategies that might increase school retention of Indigenous youth;
- improve the social and emotional well-being of Indigenous young people engaged in the Wiltja residential program;

- identify potential supports, services and pathways that can add value to existing efforts to improve opportunities for economic independence via completion of year 12 and potential pathways to post-secondary education, and options for tertiary training; and
- explore the potential for ICTs as a mechanism for providing peer and external mentoring options, including the use of social media as a means for ongoing remote city based social development exchanges.

The research questions were:

- What do the participants stories reveal about the experience of those young people travelling to Adelaide to stay and undertake some of their schooling through the Wiltja program?
- What factors influence their experience of the Wiltja program including links to home, family, peers and friendship networks?
- Why do some young people choose to stay in Adelaide to complete their education and others return to the Lands, often prior to completion of studies?
- How can the social and emotional well-being of young people be supported, while they are in the Wiltja program?
- What factors may help to retain the cultural identity of Indigenous young people and help keep connection to culture, identity and community strong, while based in Adelaide?
- What pathways both on and off the Lands maximise young people's secondary education and post school opportunities?
- What strategies may improve participation and retention, and provide opportunities for economic independence via increasing year 12 completions and opening the possibility of tertiary training and future career pathways?
- What is the potential for providing up-skilling in the safe use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to provide peer and external mentoring and the use of social media to promote ongoing social development?

The following sections of this report firstly contextualise the Wiltja program against the backdrop of more contested models of boarding schools for Indigenous young people, positioning the program as somewhat unique in its community driven approach to management of and engagement with the program. The participatory research model is outlined and the ethical considerations of undertaking research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people discussed. The findings from the inductive analysis of the narratives of the participants are reported and the significance of the findings discussed. Finally, implications arising from the research are describe and areas for further research explored.

2. Contextualising the Wiltja program

The Wiltja program was established by a group of women from Ernabella located in the APY Lands, who attended an education conference in Adelaide late in the 1970's and recognised the many educational possibilities and opportunities provided in large city high schools. In some ways the program might be likened to the boarding school model, which was seen to offer a solution to the many challenges of adequate educational service provision for the proportion of the population residing in remote locations (ABS 2015). As in all regional locations, the challenges of adequate service delivery are shaped by the tyranny of distance and therefore economies of scale to be cost-efficient.

Metropolitan-based boarding schools have functioned as the ready solution because their locality. The problem of staff retention encountered in remote localities is widely known and was most notably identified in Noel Pearson's (2011) program initiative, 'Teach Australia', which sought to inject suitably qualified trainee and qualified teachers into remote schools through an incentive scheme which required staff to complete a two-year contract in remote regions with a guarantee of a metropolitan position upon the completion of their contract. Although the initiative was never rolled-out systematically as a national program in Australia, its fate attests to the continuing challenge of remote educational standards and practices. Boarding schools in this context continue to serve as a viable means to educate young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because they provide consistency of staff and other resource requirements. Boarding schools can potentially also deliver on the requirements of government to provide a set of entitlements under the Convention of the Rights of Children (UNCRC) to ensure children who are considered to face barriers and threats that may compromise their 'full potential development' (UNICEF 2009). Education features as one of the central entitlements propounded by the CRC and reflects a greater awareness of children's rights language in social policy and human service provision.

The twin drivers of economies of scale in educational service provision and the UNCRC notwithstanding, the utility of boarding schools as a viable option for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is also a somewhat contested service delivery program logic. Mander (2012), in his study of Western Australian boarding school experiences, argues, any attempt to capture the feasibility of boarding schools as a successful model for educational outcomes can only be ascertained if their intended outcomes are situated within a complex grid of social determinants shaping Aboriginal history – from past to present. One of the central points of contention in the assessment of the merit of boarding schools for sustainable educational outcomes is the extent to which it replicates the institutional oppression indicative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples' past and present experience of Australian life. Government funding for programs that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to attend a boarding schools has also been viewed as a solution that often only benefits a few students, rather than contributing to solutions that have the potential to benefit the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in regional and remote communities (Sarra, 2008).

Boarding schools in this light therefore have historically held significance on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander landscape due their role in providing an education of young people which transitions them into mainstream society and thus breaking connection to family, culture and language. Those against the continuation of boarding schools argue for recognition of the loss of culture, separation and disconnection from a sense of Indigeneity in a lived community context (Dodson cited in Browning, 2008). In contrast, whilst not an outright dismissal of the former concerns, attention is given to service delivery impediments, or what Wilson (2014) states, in the Northern Territory's Review of Indigenous Education', as

a lack of alternatives. Here reporting is given over to the cost effective and demand responsiveness of schooling in small community settlements that are often difficult to adequately staff. An alternative position is that held by Dodson (2009) who argued for the need to move beyond binary discourses to exploring the potential of a shared space in which all of the pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are examined. As he suggests, we need to 'carefully examine all approaches, rather than falling into the trap of imagining there's just one answer that suits every situation, or one mantra under which every problem and every community can find shelter' (Dodson, 2009, p. 9).

The Wiltja program is somewhat unique in breaking from the more contested model of boarding schools in that the initiative was community driven and a response to a recognised need identified by Ernabella women. Moreover, the Wiltja program is managed by Anangu Education Services (AES), and is answerable to the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC), which has operational control. This group is usually made up of the Anangu coordinator, an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) and two to three community members representing each school. Due to the location of Wiltja, it is not possible to convene a conventional governing council meeting regularly at one of the metropolitan school sites, however, from 2011, a representative from the Wiltja governing council group travelled to the Wiltja/WHS site once a term, and in week 5 of every term, the Wiltja principal, and sometimes the Wiltja Residence manager, travel to the APY Lands to present a Wiltja report to the PYEC meeting, usually held at a different community each time. Another distinct difference with traditionally contested boarding school models, is that PYEC conducts a biennial review of the Wiltja program. These reviews often involve the collection of information in a variety of ways including single and focus group interviews, lesson and social observation, 'a day in the life of', site tours, and so on. The Wiltja principal is also a member of the WHS Governing Council, and presents a report on the Wiltja Program twice every term.

The Wiltja program therefore represents a potential solution to many of the criticisms often levelled at boarding school models in its community driven and managed approach, its accountability to Aboriginal people and its focus on strengthening the connections between the Indigenous youth and their communities. While the program is regularly reviewed, this project responds to an identified need for a transformative participatory methodology that is based on a more grounded approach, allowing the narratives of the key stakeholders to inform the findings through an inductive approach. In this way, the lived experiences of the Indigenous young people who have experience of the Wiltja program, their families and friends, and key stakeholders including Wiltja current and former staff, and teachers in the APY Lands both inform the evaluation of the program and shape the recommendations arising from the research.

3. Research approach

3.1 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

As noted in the preceding introduction, the aims and objectives for this research were developed in consultation with Wiltja Residential Program and the Office for Youth (OfY) who are partners in the Young and Well CRC.

The research was based on a grounded approach, providing the opportunity for researchers to gain a narrative, nuanced first hand participants' account of the current and longer term

impact on the young people of the Wiltja program. In addition, this research provided valuable insights into the role of ICTs and social media in the lives of young people engaged in the Wiltja program and of the potential to better utilise ICTs in this context. Anangu members of the PYEC reviewed the research design aspects and we obtained ethics approval from both the University of South Australian Human Research Ethics Committee and the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) prior to commencing the research. Anangu people assisted with translation as part of the study team. Co-researchers were also involved in the design and consultation processes of the project, assisting with interpretation where this is needed and the outcomes of this project are a work in progress as we will be continuing to work with key stakeholders in the APY Lands, Wiltja staff, the Office for Youth and the Anangu students collaboratively in identifying and implementing strategies to address identified challenges.

The role of information and communication technologies within the Wiltja context was also explored, including potential and challenges of social media use. The transformative approach adopted for this project involves ongoing work with the Wiltja students using ICTs as a medium for empowering the young people to gain leadership skills and a sense of greater agency.

A 2008 study identified a range of issues specific to education on the APY Lands, including observations about the Wiltja program, and youth mobility, and the need for 'systematic pathways advice and careers counselling' amongst other program enhancements' (Lea et al, 2008:27). What has not occurred to date is a sensitive and detailed grounded study of young peoples' stories of their lived experiences of coming to Adelaide to participate in the Wiltja residential program, and what factors influence their decision to stay and/or to return home to their home lands. This study sought to fill that gap.

3.2 TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

As noted in the preceding section, this project adopted a transformative participatory methodology involving a grounded approach. Grounded research has its roots in the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) who argued for inductive methodologies that do not begin with any priori assumptions and are designed to generate data that informs theory. As Charmaz (2014) explains, grounded researchers bring an open mind to what is happening, enabling them to learn from the situation in which the research is conducted by constructing data through observations, interactions and materials gathered about the topic or setting. This approach allows researchers to engage in interviews and field observation with participants' lived experiences, and as Gilgun (2004) suggests, bring their voices to the forefront.

While we have adopted a grounded approach to gathering and coding the data obtained from interviews with key stakeholders, the second key component of the approach is participatory action research (PAR). PAR is consistent with Indigenist research that is undertaken in response to identified needs and involves an action oriented approach that contributes to change for those who are participating as well as their communities. PAR involves a similar approach to action research in that it involves active reflective practice through iterative spirals in which a problem or need is identified and explored, a response is planned and implemented, followed by observation, evaluation and measuring the impact, leading to review of the findings, the sharing of findings and reflection in collaboration with peers, and then, if required, the beginning of a new cycle of action. What is specific to PAR, is, as McIntyre (2008) identifies, that it focuses on 'the active participation of researchers and participants in the co-construction of knowledge; the promotion of self- and critical awareness

that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change; and the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process'. Participatory action research therefore changes the role of participants from 'subjects' or 'objects' of a study to 'agents' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012) who are involved throughout each stage of the process from initial framing of problems, identifying solutions and translating findings into actions within their communities. As Kindon et al (2007) explain, PAR changes the research approach from one based on hierarchical relationships between research and action, and between 'researchers' and 'researched', to one in which researchers and members of the community collaborate to examine the problem and bring about change.

Following McIntyre (2008) and Indigenist research principles (Fredericks, 2008; Rigney, 2006) the approach employed in this study aimed to meet the following requirements:

- A collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem
- The desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation
- The engagement of students, staff and researchers leading to the collective action to arrive at a useful solution that benefits the people involved involves the participants and research
- An alliance made between researchers and participants, and their communities in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process.

The analysis was also based on a grounded approach, informed by the findings rather than preconceived theoretical constructs. This form of analysis allows for the evidence to inform theory and leads to researchers to a more open interpretation of the findings. The proposed approach therefore employed a user-centric model in which the intervention was led by the participants. The target audience/participants were therefore authentically engaged as co-generators of knowledge and ideas and co-designers of solutions (Schuler & Namioka, 1993).

We have adopted the term 'transformative grounded research' based on the work of Redman-MacLaren and Mills (2015) who argued that research which leads to grounded theories informed by PAR can promote greater participation and equity of power for positive change. Their approach is consistent with that of Teram, Schachter and Stalker (2005) who argued that despite the differences between grounded theory and PAR, the integration of the two can empower participants by amplifying their voices. Their proposed integrated approach stemmed from the need to produce knowledge that is relevant to and acceptable to the professional community, and consideration of power differentials between participants and professionals.

We acknowledge in undertaking this research that we are non-Indigenous researchers. We therefore make no claim that we have employed decolonizing methodologies, only that our approach is consistent with Indigenist methodologies and seeks through the PAR approach to respect participants as co-researchers and experts who can inform and guide the research, while also benefiting from their participation. As Redman-MacLaren and Mills (2015) point out, what is critical to our approach is that we have attempted to privilege participation, redistribution of power and facilitate action for positive change (referred to by Redman-MacLaren and Mills as the transformational component of the approach).

Our approach as non-Indigenous researchers was also guided by Guenther, Osborne, Arnott and McRae-Williams (2015) who described the challenges in undertaking research in cross-cultural contexts and the complexities that arise when there is cultural distance between researchers from ‘outside’ and participants who are ‘inside’ the remote community context. Yet, the context in which this research has been undertaken is also cross-cultural in that the site of the research is both the Wiltja program in metropolitan Adelaide, one that is modelled on Western boarding school traditions, and the APY Lands where the majority of the Wiltja participants reside during holiday periods. While acknowledging the complexities facing non-Indigenous researchers, Guenther et al (2015) nevertheless argue that there is a case for intercultural methodologies that are collaborative, relational, participatory and reflexive. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, they suggest that research that promotes the Indigenous voice as a counter narrative to Western hegemonic control can be an effective strategy for challenging the dominant discourse. They conclude by proposing that non-Indigenous researchers can and should engage in research ‘that is genuinely collaborative and respectful of the ontological, epistemological and axiological positions of those we work with in remote communities’ as mediators and trusted critical friends who work collaboratively through a generative process of co-construction of knowledge at the ‘cultural interface’. This is the approach we have adopted for this study

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In undertaking this research we were conscious of our ethical responsibilities in undertaking research with Indigenous participants. The following protocols were observed to ensure compliance with ethical standards and to safeguard the participants involved in this study.

Research undertaken at Wiltja posed minimal safety risks to participants and researchers as the data was collected at Wiltja by trained researchers under the supervision of the CIs. All research conducted on the APY Lands adhered to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (www.aiatsis.gov.au) Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies, which the project has been framed to adhere to including:

- Ensuring that all researchers visiting the APY Lands obtained a Permit (Research) from the APY Executive prior to commencing research.
- Requiring that the research officer and all members of the research team hold a police clearance and obtain a Permit (Research)* from the APY Executive before commencing data collection.
- Arranging appointments in collaboration with and to suit the stakeholders.
- Participants were advised of their right to withdraw at any time.
- Data collection did not proceed unless the young people agreed to their participation and signed the consent form (again this will also be provided in Pitjantjatjara).
- All participants were advised that they would be anonymous and all data collected would be de-identified and confidential. As the collection of cultural knowledge or restricted traditional knowledge is not the object of this research; any data generated or identified by participants as traditional or cultural Aboriginal Knowledge is owned only by the Aboriginal participants and will not be included as part of the raw data.

- All data from the study is stored in a locked cabinet in the principal CIs office and sent in digital format to the other CIs who ensured the security of the data. All data on the computer is password protected and will only be accessible to CIs and researcher assistants. Data is retained in accordance with Function 6 of the Records Disposal Schedule for South Australian Public Hospitals.
- The CIs were trained to recognise any behaviours which may indicate the child should be given a break or advised to terminate the session.
- The research was approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee and the DECD after formal written approval was obtained from the PYEC, APY Lands School Principals and the Anangu Education Services.

3.4 METHODS

The research approach involved:

- Desktop research to identify all relevant, local, national and international literature and resources relevant to an exploration of young Indigenous peoples' experiences of moving from rural remote communities to cities to participate in residential programs.
- Consultations with relevant stakeholders and key informants on and off the APY Lands who have an interest and/or role in relations to the Wiltja Residential program or more broadly secondary and postsecondary educational, vocational and employment pathways
- Qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups (approximately 45 mins to one hour) with self-selected young people who shared their perceptions, feelings and experiences of moving to Adelaide for the Wiltja residential program
- Focus group sessions (approximately 30-45mins) with family of participants, nominated by the young people concerned where appropriate, including those who have returned to the Lands as well as those with young people resident in Adelaide and/or still at Wiltja
- Semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions (approximately 30-45mins) with key stakeholders.
- A grounded approach to analysis in which the CIs undertook initial coding of themes emerging from the interviews and focus groups from which interconnections were made enabling larger concepts or themes to emerge. Where feasible, the observations of researchers were validated with participants in subsequent focus groups.

Participants were recruited from five main groups:

- The first group of participants comprised current Wiltja students who were engaged in the Wiltja program. A total of 15 current students participated in focus groups.
- The second group of participants comprised past students of the Wiltja program who had graduated. A total of 5 former graduates were interviewed (3 participated in the session in the APY Lands and 2 at Wiltja);

- The third group of participants comprised past students of Wiltja who did not graduate. A total of 3 former students of Wiltja who did not graduate were interviewed (2 interviewed in the APY Lands and one in Adelaide).
- The fourth group of participants were Wiltja staff. A total of 8 Wiltja staff participated in focus group sessions conducted at Wiltja
- The final group of research participants included people with a key stakeholder interest in the Wiltja program: such as current and past teachers in the APY Lands, administrative or other staff involved in the Wiltja program; families of past and present Wiltja students; community members from students' home communities of origin. A total of 17 key stakeholders were interviewed in the APY Lands.

The interviews and focus groups with current and former students of Wiltja explored their experiences of Wiltja, their transition to the program, their social connectedness to family, and friends in the APY Lands, their use of ICTs and knowledge of how to be safe online; their aspirations and aspects of the program that they felt were good and aspects they would like to see changed. Interviews and focus groups with Wiltja staff and other key stakeholders explored similar themes from their perspective of significant people in the lives of the participants.

4. Findings

Several key themes emerged from the analysis of the interview and focus group data. These are summarised in the following section.

4.1 MOTIVATION TO ATTEND WILTJA

Current students expressed various motivations and influences that led to them coming to Wiltja. Many students were encouraged to attend by siblings who had graduated from Wiltja. As one student commented:

'My older brothers were here and graduated. My other brother's back home working, and my brother's in Adelaide working on his music career'.

Similarly, another student described how her mother had found out about Wiltja and sent her older sister to study at Wiltja who had since graduated:

'My mum used to come here, not to Wiltja, I mean to Adelaide, and found out that there is a boarding school in Adelaide. So my older sister went there first, and then a couple of years later she graduated. And yeah, I started following her footsteps'.

Aspirations for a good education, or a better life were also evident in discussions with current students, as one student described:

Good support. And good opportunities. Or, better opportunities.

Another commented on the influence of friends who had graduated from Wiltja:

'The way I found about Wiltja I had a lot of friends that came here and when they got back to the community every holiday time they would tell me how fun it was down here and how there was a lot of opportunities down here to get a good education so I thought about that. I asked mum and dad and then they said go for it so I went from there, and I've enjoyed it the first three'.

4.2 TRANSITION

A Wiltja staff member described Wiltja as a 'middle place' for youth in transition. As the staff member described:

'Again, as I mentioned before, what happens in community and what happens in the mainstream in Adelaide are very different. Wiltja is almost like a middle place, it's a bit like if you're going to Perth to Mars you might drop in at the moon on the way, so we're the moon. What they do is they're coming from the community living in Adelaide. However, in here we have what we call Wiltja, and the Wiltja is like an Unanu community. You know you look around the grounds, the things that we have, fire pits, the sand for storytelling, the art work, art room, the dance. All of those things are things that they do within their own culture and within their own communities. Also the friendliness of families being able to come and visit, we do - last term we did, families came here and had fire pits, and they had a really good day'.

There was a strong sense that transition into the program is challenging for many students because the culture is so unfamiliar to them. This particularly applied to their first encounter with Wiltja rules. For example, one current student commented:

'Especially for a new student, trying to make it, this school feel more like home, instead of making it a different place. If you're new, you can't just - like, you can't just slap heaps of rules at their face'.

On the other hand, the importance of social connections in easing the transition for new students was also noted with one student stating:

'Yes sometimes when new students come in and they look a bit nervous and a bit shy, I tell them about what I did and how I managed to keep going, keep on going'.

4.3 SOCIAL CONNECTEDNES

Many of the current and former students spoke of the importance in maintaining their connection with family. For students at Wiltja, the main connection with family on the APY Lands was via mobile phone. There were tensions expressed by some participants who felt Wiltja curfews on the use of mobile phones for older students and the restricted access to phones for younger students exacerbated their feelings of loneliness and being 'homesick'. Some older students interviewed understood why the restrictions were in place, but still expressed concern as indicated by this current student who stated:

'Well, I think that they did that because at night, you know, most of us is always on our mobile phone and they think that we should hand it in early because it's really a big distraction and it doesn't really give us much sleep, because

everyone's always on their phone it doesn't give us much sleep and probably wouldn't work much as do a lot of work in school, probably you slack off from being on the mobile phone all night'. 'Well, for me yes I think that's okay but for others I think it's not okay because I think they think that they don't get much time at night to talk to their family or friends'.

One of the tensions evident between Wiltja staff and students relates to the safe use of social media. Hence the strict rules concerning access to mobile phone as staff expressed concern that students were using their phones inappropriately. It was clear from our interviews that Wiltja students had varying levels of knowledge about being safe online, with one student reporting that their Facebook account had been hacked and most students learning about online safety from family and/or friends who may not have the required knowledge to ensure their use of social media, for example, Facebook, was safe. A related YAW CRC funded project (*Palya Net: Technologies for Socially Inclusive Communities*) has adopted a transformative participatory approach to working with participants on the development of their understanding of safe online practice through facilitated sessions in which they are co-creating an online platform and being mentored to develop a sense of self-agency to take responsibility for the curation of material produced through the project for sharing online (see Wood et al, 2016 for further information).

Another theme that emerged from interviews with students concerned their relationships with youth workers. One student commented on difficulties he experienced in being counselled by youth workers, indicating that he would prefer to confide with his parents:

'Yes, the main thing is like youth workers or some students, like when you want to feel alone they'd always come to you and, like, you're in a bad mood. They keep asking you or get you up to do what you have to do and so - and I don't really like that. I like to have a relax, you know, make you feel like I need my time alone, you know, and then when I get pushed around and getting told I have to do it - It makes me want to just, you know, stress out and just want to get out of this place. It's too much... [they're] just like they're not my parents and that, you know? I just don't - I just don't want to talk to youth workers about my feelings, what am I going through or what the problem is, you know? I would rather tell my parents because they understand that I'm the child of them, but I just wouldn't. For me, I just rather be alone but when most of the time when I'm alone I just contact my family and tell them what's wrong'.

Other students and education stakeholders expressed the view that there are not enough Anangu staff with whom they could confide. This view was expressed by a parent who stated:

'There are too many Piranpa [non-Aboriginal staff]... when they send people home, the way do it it's no good. Some workers just couldn't deal with it and would just send people home'.

Social connectedness between students and siblings was a strong factor in students being motivated to persevere at Wiltja. For example, one student commented:

'Well, one of the main reasons why kids are still here because we have friend and family that are here as well, so they like support you. All the students, they're basically like brothers and sisters so they support each other and all that'.

Similarly, another student noted the impact of these supports on his perseverance:

'Just got friends and family here as well supporting and outside times we ring home and then family are still supporting you to stay longer. I actually push myself as well'.

4.4 PERSEVERANCE

Student perseverance was related both to their aspirations and their sense of social connectedness. For example, one student stated:

'For me the main thing that keeps me supporting myself is that this year is my last year and that's how I support myself because, you know, it's my last year and I'm almost done so it's why I keep supporting myself like that, by just staying positive and telling myself'

Another student was motivated by the prospect of independence away from home:

'As I'm done with my training I don't want to go back to where I'm from. I'd rather live away from everyone like family and I'd rather just to be, you know, a man on my own, learn how to be on my own and I be independent on my thing'.

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And another student noted the way in which social connections encouraged students to come back each term:

'Just only when you go into a class and then you make - you build a lot of good relationships with your classmates, I think that's maybe one of the things that I come back every term for. Don't let my class down - always coming back to support each other'.

'Yeah. And that's one good thing - we support each other and stuff. And I just like - yeah, finishing Year 12 is pretty big for me, and I just keep that in mind. Like I make sure I still have the opportunity to finish it'.

However, several stakeholders noted that students whose families had more experience of Western ways are more likely to adapt and succeed as indicated by this Grandfather's comment:

'But I can see it's to do with the curriculum that they've got in their own communities, how they're prepared. So it's sort of, I was prepared in a way because I had white families do mentoring with me through what I had to go through, you know what I mean so I was pretty lucky'.

4.5 RULES AND INDEPENDENCE

Several current and former students expressed difficulty in reconciling Western based rules with their experiences on the APY Lands. For example, several students spoke of the lack of freedom and independence to go out on their own without being accompanied by youth workers:

'I think the negative side of about here is that we don't get much of freedom like where we could go out on our own and where we could learn how to be more - you know?'

'Yes, independent and, like, doing your own stuff in the city'.

Wiltja staff on the other hand explained that the rules are in place to keep students safe as their parents and grandparents expect Wiltja to maintain a safe place for their children. This tension between student and staff perspectives is evident in the response from one Wiltja staff member on the question of rules and student freedom:

'They were going, you know, but we're kids. We want to do this. We don't want to do this. I'm going yeah, but hang on - and they're going we've talked to other kids that are now going to Immanuel - no, not Immanuel. Westminster and things like that. They go yeah, they don't have so many rules. They can just sign out and they go up the shop and things like that. I said, hang on a minute. You've got to remember one thing. Who is Westminster's school for mainly? Is that an Anangu school? They're like oh, no. I said, well we're here for Anangu and we've got to have Anangu rules. But your family have told us they don't want you just walking off to the shop Well they didn't actually respond too well <laughter>. They actually said but our parents don't know what we want. I said, well no. what your parents and your grandparents are doing is trying to keep you safe. They worry about Adelaide. They do always say to the kids Adelaide is dangerous. We're trying to change that way of speaking as well, because you don't want the kids to be fearful and like oh my God, Adelaide's this'

The theme of Wiltja being a safe place for Anangu youth was also evident in an interview with a graduate of Wiltja who described it as a safe place.

An education stakeholder also commented on the safety afforded by Wiltja, particularly for students who are vulnerable as the staff member commented:

'And yet I mean Wiltja, to their credit, has always tried to provide somewhere for those kids that actually need, for their own wellbeing, safety, survival in some cases, they need somewhere to go and there isn't anywhere else that is going to take them'.

The issue of the segregation between males and females also featured in conversations with current students as the following focus group discussion with four current students suggests:

Female 2: "Say if we want to go up to the shops or something - what's all that'.

Female 2: 'Like, on the school bus'.

Male 1: 'Yeah.

Female 2: 'On the school bus there's a rule: girls are at the front and boys are at the back, because us students catch the bus together, and that's Wiltja's relationship policy, that you're not allowed to have a relationship while you're here'.

Male 1: *It's a big policy.*

Female 2: *'It's like a big policy. Everyone still does it; no-one really follows it. Anyway, last week these fellas had a big thing with one of the youth workers, and like we tried, or I tried to explain to the youth workers, saying like, we are the only two girls from that school, like we're mature. We know right from wrong, and they think that this is like trust issues again - they think that we are going to jump the seat and hook up with a fella, like in that way, and I tried to explain to them that that's not going to happen, because we're all like one big family'.*

Male 1: *'Yeah, and we tried to explain we're like families, you know, we get along with each other really well'.*

Female 2: *'Yeah, that's how we feel'.*

Male 1: *'Yeah'.*

Female 2: *'Yeah, that's how we think about it, but the youth workers think in a different way, like we're trying to get in a relationship with one of the fellas'.*

Male 2: *'They overthink'.*

Female 2: *'They think things that are not even true'.*

The parents of a child who was expelled felt strongly that their daughter was 'kicked out' because of her sexual preferences and relationship with another girl attending Wiltja. They expressed mixed feelings acknowledging the opportunities offered by Wiltja, but their frustration at what they perceived to be discrimination based on gender:

'We know that we have to be blessed that these kids are being educated under the Wiltja program. But, that they should not to be discriminated on who they are as sex preferences or discriminated on who they are as an individual, whether you are male or female'.

When current students were asked if they felt able to express their concerns, they advised that there is a student group ('student voice') but there was a perception that the 'student voice' has little impact on the established rules, as one student commented:

'Well, I'm in Student Voice and we raise it, but nothing ever changes'.

A similar comment was made by a graduate who stated:

Male graduate: 'The general thing was that it just didn't provide a good environment for students who had a voice. I think about [student name omitted], he's a student who had a voice and it wasn't supported'.

Interviewer: 'So it wasn't supported, people challenging systems or being advocates for themselves?'

Male Graduate: 'Yeah, but not even challenging. Just students who had the conversation, who were able to sort of say 'this is our school, this is our community' or 'this is our school, we've got a voice, hear us and work with us'.

In contrast, this same student noted that leadership was supported at the school he attending while boarding at Wiltja, noting:

'My leadership at school was fully embraced'.

4.6 BENEFITS OF ATTENDING WILTJA

Although there were some tensions expressed by students in relation to unfamiliar rules and a sense of isolation from family, there were also many positive aspects of Wiltja identified by participants and their families such as educational opportunities as noted in relation to factors contributing to educational outcomes, city-based experience, motivation and perseverance, and also the recreational and sport activities.

For example, one parent stated:

'The way we see it, and the way I see it, we need to see the two worlds and the two worlds connected to, you know, to Anangu people and Aboriginal people living in Australia. So, yeah that's, Wiltja is a place where our kids need to go and see the wider world, live in the city. And the accommodation is really good place and they understand, you know, the people living there, the house parents, they understand the kids who come from the Lands. Yeah, cultural understanding. And they've been coming here, those people they used to come here and they used to work in the Lands so, you know, that's why Anangu people are happy with them. And you know, the really important thing, the way I see it, our kids need to go and live in the city and learn the wider world. Living in Wiltja and going to school there, speaking English, writing and you know and doing a lot of stuff. Learning, you know? Yeah and education is really important for our kids and I think this is a good time for our kids to get educated and get a job because people are recognising Anangu people are coming in to the wider world and...'Always learning. We always want our kids to learn, every day and you know and learn every minute in Adelaide'

Another relative commented:

'Well I can't comment much about the bad side of Wiltja because my grandsons got a degree and he's going places and I'm just thinking 'why aren't the rest of them doing the same thing?'

Some students also enjoyed participating in the recreational activities as evident from these two student comments:

Male 1: 'Wiltja does a lot of fun things on the weekends, like we go out on recreation, sometimes surfing, cinemas'.

Male 2: 'Get to go shopping'.

Male 1: 'Yes, you get to go shopping and sometimes if you're doing footy you get to play footy games every Sunday and go watch footy at Adelaide oval'.

Male 1. 'Wiltja gives us pretty much everything. It gives you, like you know, it helps you to become more confident of living away from home and it gives you better understanding of how to live in the city.'

A graduate of Wiltja commented on her positive experiences also, noting that she gained:

*'New experiences, educational opportunities and new skills [and suggested] It's good in the city and the high school. I was going to high school on the Lands and it's a bit different here in the city and doing lots of new things. Learning how to..... *silence* Umm. Doing science and ... *long pause* They taught us how to look after ourselves, taught us how to keep our rooms cleans and clean the room and...respect. To look after ourselves and each other'.*

It was also noted by an education stakeholder that success can't necessarily be measured by how many graduate from year 12, suggesting:

'So I suppose the thing about the Wiltja program is the... going back to the...I'm jumping around a bit here... But the thing about the nexus between Wiltja graduates or people who have been to Wiltja for any amount of time, people get out of it what they want to get out of it. They don't necessarily have to have finished year twelve to get everything they wanted to get out of it'.

Another commented:

'It's a good experience for them even if they don't graduate, or a positive attrition in that sense, but they know that it's unlikely that most of those will hang in there. And so they're a little, occasionally, as I say they have taken kids that were going to be dead in six months, or needed for protection to get out. I mean, part of the problem here is what gets measured. What gets measured, so they've got year nines who get measured in NAPLAN, that's one thing. Closing the gap is attendance, NAPLAN and school completion. That's the only thing that gets measured... for a lot of kids more broadly it's been a great experience and is probably a bit of a hallmark of that positive attrition stuff where there is [sic] kids that go for a term or two or three and if they come back in a reasonably well adjusted and positive way then that's not a failure. Even if they were in year nine and didn't continue into term four and do year ten and come back. If they've had that experience, it's been positive and they come back and reengage in schooling that's good'.

However, another stakeholder also cautioned that:

'I think if you look at the early ideas of the Wiltja program and now then the theme is of course that people want the best for their kids, of course but there is that idea that if you immerse in people in another culture that they will just pick up all the stuff. I know it is good to be able to come to Adelaide and know how to catch a bus and all that sort of stuff, but there is a lot more stuff that. It is just very difficult for people to absorb all that stuff. And I think that that is sometimes one of the issues that parents and PYEC would talk about, having unrealistic expectations of what Wiltja can do'.

4.7 GOVERNANCE

Several stakeholders including graduates, family members and an education stakeholder were concerned that the PYEC as governing body does not have the level of engagement required to provide strategic direction to Wiltja. Part of this was seen to arise because Wiltja staff are unable to attend all PYEC meetings, and the demands on both PYEC and Wiltja

staff time. Another issue raised by an education stakeholder and parent related to the decision to broaden the reach of Wiltja beyond the APY Lands to include two additional states: Western Australia and the Northern Territory. As one education stakeholder said:

'For me it was like 'this is our school, it's for Anangu kids and it's not for every other nationality' and that's sort of what became the problem because so many of the fights or the issues that occur in the school or in the boarding house, it just didn't work in the sense that you had all of these kids together. It was like a melting pot. So you had all of these different nationalities, I suppose you can say, or language groups, and a lot of the fights were because this kid has said something in a language but that other child has also known about it. It just didn't work. I think what it needs to be, is that Wiltja is for Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara students. It's not for Arrernte speaking students. It's not for Lowitja speaking students. It's not for Pintabe. And an issue with having non Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara students is that you will have students that don't understand the language and so that is another cultural barrier'.

Another education stakeholder commented:

'I mean one of the issues you hear, in more recent years when the residence was expanded, is of course about kids who were staying there who aren't Anangu. You know that's a conversation that is never really going to satisfy anyone anyway because there is always going to be someone at Pipalyatjara who says 'Well my son or my daughter couldn't go there because there wasn't space'. It's more complicated than that I know. They have to fill the residence, they've got to get the funding and so on so of course they are spreading to the tri-state area. And in many ways, why not? But one of the issues has been, of course, the success of the program is about graduates and which of those graduates are from the APY Lands and which are from elsewhere is a problem'.

This stakeholder suggested that perhaps the PYEC is no longer able to govern effectively given Wiltja includes students who are not from the APY Lands. As another education stakeholder asserted:

'I think they need to shift their governance structure out from PYEC. It only meets once a term and it is not an effective governing body. The other thing is that most kids there are now no longer APY kids and so therefore the governance is not representative of the students. So I actually think they need an entirely different governance structure and they need at least two meetings per term with a much smaller governing body. Perhaps say four or five APY reps and then three or four other reps. If Wiltja is working with Alice Springs and other mobs they should have somebody from that community on this governing council. If they have got kids from Oodnadatta there should be able to be a rep on the school council. It's really gammon governance. It's not real. It's not representative either'.

A graduate of Wiltja also echoed similar concerns about the effectiveness of the governance arrangements, suggesting:

'They [Wiltja] need to be more inclusive in the partnership. They need to consult more with their governing body which is PYEC and actually listen to what PYEC say, not come and say "this is what we are doing and that is it"'

One education stakeholder suggested that the appointment of a Wiltja community engagement officer might be an effective way to better connect Wiltja with its governing body in the APY Lands:

'The Wiltja community engagement person who can be travelling up to the Lands, who can be at the school, who can be at the residence, and if there are questions they are the person who could go and talk at PYEC.... that's the person who could do stuff - be there, be bringing people down, be far more closely involved - and that's a really long term position in many ways. That's not something you have for six months, you don't have a project officer engagement with Wiltja and then say "alright we've done that, we've ticked that box'. And there would need to be a commitment from that person, someone who is willing to spend a reasonable amount of time in the role because you get a new person and they spend six months of a year just getting to know everybody and then they go'.

5. Discussion and a possible way forward

We began this report by outlining the transformative participatory approach adopted for this study and emphasising that as non-Indigenous researchers we recognised that we are 'outsiders' reporting on the experiences shared with us by current and former students, family members, Wiltja staff and education stakeholders. We make no claims that we can interpret the findings from these interviews and focus groups, nor can we make any claim that we have adopted a decolonizing approach to the research. Rather, we have adopted a grounded approach, which has helped to inform the next stage of the research, which involves participatory action research aimed at promoting greater participation and equity of power for positive change. Consistent with this grounded approach, we did not begin this project with any predetermined theories, rather we have sought to codify the interviews and focus group discussions into themes that have then helped us to search for relevant theories and will in collaboration with the participants, help to inform new theories grounded in the voices of the stakeholders.

In reviewing the themes that have emerged from this study of the Wiltja program, we note that there are tensions between the different cultural contexts in which the Wiltja students reside. On the one hand, there are numerous testimonies from current students, graduates, family members and education stakeholders of the benefits of the Wiltja experience for many students. On the other hand, there are some former students, family members and stakeholders who have identified several challenges relating to the clash between Western values and rules and their own cultural backgrounds. These tensions revolve around Wiltja's duty of care to keep students safe and their sense of responsibility to parents and family members who they perceive as sharing concerns about the safety of their children, and students' perception that they are restricted and unable to exert their independence and autonomy. Tension was evident in the students' restricted access to their phones and social media given children who are homesick rely on their phones to maintain their social connection with their families. Although some older students understood the rationale for restricting access to phones, they also recognised the challenges that can pose for students wanting to connect with their families back home.

There were also tensions evident in the extent to which students perceived that they had a voice in the governance of Wiltja and there was a perception that the 'student voice' platform designed to allow students space to express their views on matters relating to the management of Wiltja was tokenistic and that their views were not taken seriously. Similarly, some stakeholders felt that the PYEC governance of Wiltja is not as effective as it should be. There was a perception by at least some stakeholders that the expansion of Wiltja to include

young people from locations other than the APY Lands had created a further cultural barrier for some students, and that PYEC could not fully represent all stakeholders' interests without extending the membership to include representatives from the other communities.

The tensions or contradictions evident do not diminish the overwhelming evidence that there are very positive outcomes for young people who persevere at Wiltja. However, the views of the various stakeholders who participated in this project do highlight areas for further participatory work that can address some of the apparent contradictions between the three cultural contexts in which Wiltja students interact (ie their home community, Wiltja and the high schools they attend in Adelaide).

A participatory approach to addressing these contradictions might begin by first bringing the key stakeholders together to make explicit some of the contradictions between the contexts in which the students operate, and collaboratively co-constructing strategies that can help to resolve some of these contradictions. While we are reluctant to apply Eurocentric theories to the analysis of the interviews and focus groups, Engeström's (2001) third-generation Cultural-Historical Theory (CHAT) can provide a useful lens for understanding how contradictions can arise between different activity systems. As Engeström' (2001) argues, activity systems include subjects (ie stakeholders) who have a motive (object) they wish to achieve and they use certain tools (cognitive such as language and material – for example technologies) to help them to achieve that object. The activity system is further complicated because each activity system includes a community with multiple points of view, traditions and interests, noting that members of a community play different roles (division of labour) within an activity system. Engeström's (2001) approach recognises the multiple perspectives and networks of interacting activity systems, and he argues that the interactions of two or more activity systems will reveal contradictions in the objects of each system. Expansive learning, he argues, can occur when those objects are shared, or jointly constructed.

Adopting a participatory action research that involves bringing each of the stakeholder groups together to explore the possible contradictions between students' different cultural contexts and then working with them to identify strategies for resolving such contradictions is the next step in this journey. Consistent with grounded theory approaches and PAR, this process involve validation of the analysis by all of the stakeholders and then establishing a shared commitment to work collaboratively through iterative cycles in which a problem or need is identified and explored, a response is planned and implemented, followed by observation, evaluation and measuring the impact, leading to review of the findings, the sharing of findings and reflection in collaboration with peers, and then, if required, the beginning of a new cycle of action. In adopting this approach, we seek to focus on 'the active participation of researchers and participants in the co-construction of knowledge; the promotion of self- and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change; and the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process' (McIntyre, 2008).

We conclude this report noting that it is just the beginning of this participatory collaboration in which we as non-Indigenous researchers seek to engage in 'collaborative and respectful of the ontological, epistemological and axiological positions of those we work with' as 'outsiders' who work constructively with 'insiders' (Guenther et al, 2015) to bring about transformative change.

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Appendices

These include material that is supplementary to the text in the main body of the report.

Glossary

AES	Anangu Education Services
AEW	Anangu Education Worker
APY	Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara
ICTs	Information and Communications Technologies
OfY	Office for Youth
Palya	Anangu word for 'good'
PAR	Participatory Action research
Piranpa	Non-Aboriginal person
PYEC	Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee