UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

CREATING A SOCIETY FOR THE FUTURE: A framework for adolescent social cohesion

By

by Rumbidzai Mabambe

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under the supervision of Distinguished Professor Jim Macnamara (Principal Supervisor) and Associate Professor Amelia Johns (Co-Supervisor).

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Rumbidzai Mabambe declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Communication in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures

Researcher Bio

Rumbi is a social cohesion advocate whose passion is enabling improved livelihoods for vulnerable groups and those at risk of being excluded from society. Along with expertise in governance, project management, strategic communication and marketing, Rumbi has a strong background in stakeholder engagement and management across industries including health and community work. She is currently studying for a PhD in the UTS School of Communication. She is an Executive Director for the Chain Reaction Foundation, a not-for-profit (NFP) organisation that works with vulnerable groups including young adolescents and their carers. As well as operational management, her role at the Chain Reaction Foundation includes delivering wellbeing and leadership programs to students from Year 5 to Year 12. She has an Honours degree in Agricultural Economics from the University of Zimbabwe, a Masters in Marketing from the National University of Science and Technology (Zimbabwe) and has worked in the community and not for profit sector for over 15 years.

Abstract

Society relies on social cohesion, which is established and maintained through communication, connection, social capital, and mobilisation of shared values and goals Bourdieu, 1985). Adolescents (13–17-year-olds) are the adults and decision makers of the near future. It is in adolescence that a young person begins to explore their concept of self in society. This research used a Participatory Research Approach (PAR) (Bergold, 2012; McIntyre, 2008; McTaggart, 1991) to explore social cohesion from an adolescent perspective – an under-researched area. Between February and October 2023, 19 marginalised young people participated in 14 initial interviews, nine discussion groups, Photo Voice activities, and eight follow-up interviews. Participants all attended the Learning Ground, a wellbeing and engagement centre for young people at risk of disengaging from school, in Mt Druitt in western Sydney. This research explored their understanding and experience of social cohesion and included discussions on the five domains in the Scanlon Index for Social Cohesion (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008). The findings affirmed that firstly, that human development is an important part of social cohesion and this is supported by the centrality of interpersonal relationships making adolescence is an age of significance for societal cohesion. Secondly, a recognition of the role that access plays in facilitating adolescent interaction with the world and hence social cohesion. In their search for belonging, their interaction with society through institutions, and their willingness to change their actions to 'fit in', adolescents encounter challenges that offer opportunities for greater understanding in social cohesion scholarship and practice.

Chapter 1 Introduction

> "… *We are not mere bystanders to these trends and their consequences, and I urge you not to be "mere scientists" in your response! This is our society I am describing. These are our communities. These are our local neighbourhoods. The places where we live are the places where social cohesion is under threat; the places where a growing number of people are experiencing loneliness; the places where social isolation is becoming a public health issue".*
> *(Mackay, 2019, p. 37)*

In both social and psychological studies, adolescence is a period of significance as adolescents experience changes in relationships with friends, family and as they more independently explore the broader social environment. Adolescent studies (Cheng et al., 2021; van den Bos et al., 2018) demonstrate that adolescence is a formative period where social interactions shape and influence the health, mental health outcomes and behaviour of young people (Pachucki & Goodman, 2015). As adolescents interact with family, friends, and broader social networks, these interactions shape their mental health and social behaviours. This influence impacts how they will live in society and therefore social cohesion. Adolescence is a developmental stage in which young people begin to transition to adulthood and where disengagement from school and community as well as mental health issues begin to arise (Ozer et al., 2010). Research into social cohesion, which is about how we can live in a more harmonious society, is relevant for this age group as they will be the society of the future.

Social cohesion is likened to an invisible glue that holds people together and helps us work together for each other's good. Social cohesion is a panacea, addressing societal issues like isolation, exclusion, inequality and marginalisation that, if left unaddressed, can cause societies to disintegrate into civil unrest. Researching social cohesion from an adolescent

perspective offers an opportunity for greater understanding of a concept that has, in the past, been discussed from an adult perspective. The young people in this research attend a wellbeing and behavioural change centre for young people at risk of disengaging from school located in Mt Druitt in Sydney's western suburbs. They are referred to the centre because they may be frequently suspended, are truanting, anxious and withdrawn, or have ceased attending school altogether. Many are living with multiple family stress factors. Their perspective on social cohesion provides insights into how the concept can be researched in future and also offers a new awareness to policy makers and practitioners at federal, state, and local government of the impact of their decisions on adolescents.

The following research questions were explored in this research;

1. What existing domains of social cohesion measurement are relevant to adolescent youth?
2. By using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach that enables adolescents to speak for themselves in their own terms, what (if any) new domains emerge?
3. How might current models of social cohesion be better tailored for adolescent youth?

The thesis explains social cohesion from the perspective of young people aged 13- 17 living in disadvantaged circumstances. Using PAR as an approach to the research, the thesis provides recommendations for scholarship, policy makers and service providers when thinking about adolescent inclusion and its effect on social cohesion. Social cohesion as a concept is of interest to researchers and policy makers because of its potential to contribute to a more harmonious and inclusive society. It is seen by many as a vehicle for unity while

respecting diversity. This pursuit for unity and diversity alone makes it worthwhile in a world which seems to be becoming, on one level, more multicultural and accepting of diversity, while on another more polarised with the proliferation of fringe groups and 'cancel culture' (Ng, 2020; Norris, 2021). Within a polarised society, what differentiates us begins to take precedence over what unites us, putting social cohesion at risk.

1.0 The Adolescent

As they grow, adolescents "construct stories of who they are in relation to others" (Korn, 1998, p. 223 as cited in Tinson, 2009, p. 4). This sense of self is linked to their relationships with institutions, either familial, school, or community. At this developmental stage, young people learn critical skills such as the ability to see and take on other's perspectives. They learn reciprocity and begin to build trust in relationships extending beyond family groups. Adolescents become more responsive to social cues, and peer influence works as both a positive and negative influence. Research with adolescents provides an opportunity for this social constructivism to be captured and to validate the way that adolescents view themselves in their world.

For the purposes of this research, adolescence is defined as those aged between 13 and 17 years of age. According to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is an individual aged 0–18 years. There are varying age ranges for adolescence and other terms have been used to describe the particular age group that his research focuses on. These are outlined in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1 ADOLESCENT AGE

Organisation	Term Used	Age Range in Years
United Nations	Child	0-18
World Health Organization	Adolescent Youth Young People	10-19 15-24 10-24
Australian Department of Health	Early Adolescence Traditional or mid-adolescence Late adolescence/Youth	10-13 14-18 19-23

In this thesis, other terms such as young people or children will be used to refer to this age group (unless clarified). It explores social cohesion from the perspective of this age group that so far, has not been included in the Scanlon Social Cohesion research. The annual Scanlon Social Cohesion participants are 18 years and older, and this age restriction means young people are consistently left out of this eminent research.

There is growing recognition of the need to not only listen to young people but also to incorporate their ideas into program delivery both at grassroots and policy level. Young people have risen in their own right to speak on issues that affect them. On the world stage young activists such as Malala Yousafzai on educating girls and Greta Thunberg on climate change have shown the validity of young people's experiences. In Australia, a number of organisations have emerged that are 'youth-led' or that advocate for programs that have emerged from young people and where young people determine the activities. In New South Wales (NSW), the Advocate for Children and Young People Act (2014), commits to the appointment of an Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) whose role is the promote the safety, wellbeing and participation of young people in matters that affect them. Their mandate includes children aged 0-24. In 2024, ACYP reports have included inquiries into Out of Home Care and the use of hotels, caravan parks and motels as alternative care arrangements for young people in State care (ACYP, 2024a). One of the recommendations

from the report was the need for an independent system that ensured children's voices were *heard.* The ACYP report on schools (ACYP, 2024c) echoed this need stating that current public-school processes for including student voice ultimately implemented the recommendations of the educators rather than the students.

The Australian Human Rights Commission appoints a dedicated National Children's Commissioner to ensure that the human rights of children are both promoted and protected. This role was first appointed in 2013 under the Gillard Government, 23 years after Australia's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Even with these appointments, there is no legislation that holds government accountable to upholding their commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Anne Hollonds, the National Children's Commissioner, in her Press Club address on October 2, 2024 spoke of how the voices of vulnerable children are rarely heard (Human Rights Commission, 2 October 2024). She cited systemic failures across government departments that often take a siloed approach that further endangers children at risk. Ms Hollonds spoke of politicians who told her "there is no votes in children" when speaking of the slow progress addressing issues affecting children. There is therefore a need to better validate and address the experience and challenges of young people. Researchers need to incorporate young people's voices in research and examine academic concepts that impact their lives and which were developed without young people's perspectives. This thesis puts forward a perspective on social cohesion domains from a group of marginalised young people from a low socio-economic environment.

1.1 Mt Druitt Learning Ground

Mt Druitt is a low socioeconomic area within Blacktown City Council with a median personal income for people aged 15 and over at $500 a week, compared to NSW's state average of $664. The unemployment rate in Mt Druitt was 1.5 times the national average in the 2016 census. Blacktown City Council has multi-ethnic communities and the highest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in NSW. In the 2016 census, 73.8% of people in Mt Druitt had both parents born overseas, thus showing the diversity of cultural background in the area.

During the 2021 COVID-19 lockdown, residents and workers in Blacktown were subject to stricter requirements of compliance with Learning Ground Staff having to be tested regularly to attend work, as well as obtain permits to travel for work. This greatly impacted service delivery to an already vulnerable population.

Blacktown's diversity is also socioeconomic. The Ponds, one of the suburbs in Blacktown is in the top 1% for socioeconomic advantage in the country. Bidwill, where the Learning Ground Program is located is in the bottom 1% and is the most disadvantaged area in Blacktown in terms of unemployment, low incomes or education levels, single-parent families, low skilled occupations and poor English proficiency. In a 2023 data collection of participants at the Learning Ground, 41% of young people live in social housing, and 37% of parents and carers were unemployed. Participants in Learning Ground programs were mostly from single-parent households, living in public housing and experiencing or having experienced multiple family stress factors such as drug and alcoholism, family incarceration and family unemployment. The seven schools from which the participants are drawn all rated below the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) median. ICSEA

provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students considering parental education levels, parental occupation, the school's geographical location, and the proportion of Indigenous students.

On June 28, 2020, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Angus Thompson and Pallavi Singhal reported that police had set targets to detect 300,000 crimes and had been using quotas for increased search warrants. They reported that suburbs, like Mt Druitt, were targeted for higher search warrants. While these targets were renamed Community Safety Indicators, scholars and lawyers warned that these targets further stereotyped individuals as well as neighbourhoods as crime-prone. Anecdotally, driving through Mt Druitt one would see more police cars than when driving through other suburbs in Blacktown, Pennant Hills or the Lower Northshore.

FIGURE 1.1 POLICE TARGETS

Since 2006, the Chain Reaction Foundation, in partnership with the local community, has developed and delivered its Learning Ground programs in Mt Druitt. The need for a "Learning Ground" was identified through PAR conducted by the Chain Reaction Foundation in 2002 and published as The People's Voices. This PAR showed that there were many community leaders in Mt Druitt who wanted to work together to support their neighbourhood.

Their main concern at the time was the increased risk-taking behaviour of young people and their disconnection from school and society. A PAR approach allowed for 'long unhurried conversations' that created space for community led solutions that drew on local knowledge and local networks.

The Mt Druitt Learning Ground Project was designed as a creative wellbeing and engagement community development program that was offered to young people from diverse backgrounds facing barriers in the 11 suburbs that comprise Mt Druitt. It is a 'haven' in which families and young people can acquire self-confidence, personal development and learning skills that equip them to participate fully in school and work. The aim of Learning Ground has been to bring a new way of learning and living to the community based on the development of the whole person. From 2020, the Learning Ground has delivered a 30-week program in schools in Western Sydney and South Western Sydney.

This research builds on the participatory approach that became the Learning Ground and explores with young people, what they need to thrive in society.

1.2 The Researcher as a Facilitator

In this thesis, I build on the Chain Reaction Foundation philosophy of Each One Teach One, which means that we can all learn from each other. In Learning Ground programs this means that the teacher can teach and can also learn from the student. PAR with its focus on shifting the power dynamics between researchers and participants was the ideal approach to empower adolescents to discuss social cohesion from their perspectives. This research engaged the young people as co-researchers using PAR to gain deep insights into their lived experience and its implications for social cohesion.

As both an executive within an NFP organisation and a practitioner working with young people, I have had to grapple with the case for change and often subjective evidence of change as observed in young people undergoing an intervention program, as well as the demand for objective data demanded by funders and regulators. Approaching this as a researcher, I had to take time to consider my own philosophical approach to research and ways of knowing. In considering where I sit in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) research paradigms, I place myself within the constructivist paradigm. I believe that reality is subjective and this research took an interpretivist/constructivist approach (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) to understanding social cohesion through the epistemological knowing of the research participants, as well as myself as a researcher and a practitioner in fostering social cohesion.

PAR is not methodology as such but rather, an approach to conducting research (Markauskaite et al., 2010). PAR uses a naturalistic approach and, in this study, involved the conduct of research in the natural setting of those studied. The Mt Druitt Learning Ground was a place already familiar to the young people in this research and was considered a part of their community. A PAR approach, therefore, provided a unique opportunity to create new knowledge about social cohesion and its relevance for adolescents by actively engaging with young people in a collaborative way.

Crucial to PAR is that the research must lead to or involve actions intended to solve a problem or address a challenge by the research participants. Solutions must come from the participants themselves and must be useful to them.

Though I was approaching this research as an academic, my role was that of a co-Investigator and relied on utilising the skills of a facilitator; one who through conversation reveals an existing corridor and the participants decide which doors if any they would like to walk through. However, the corridor has to exist and for the research to begin in earnest, all participants must be able to see it. Revealing this corridor equated to explaining social cohesion in a meaningful way that allowed adolescents to fully engage in the research process. The power dynamics inherent in the adult-adolescent relationship and how these were addressed in this research are explained in Chapter 3.

The interpretivist/constructivist approach was ideal for this research as it required taking a step back from society's assumptions around what social cohesion is for all and sought to understand what social cohesion is for adolescents and how it can be fostered.

1.3 Contemporary Issues Impacting Social Cohesion

Social cohesion has been defined as "the property by which the whole society, and individuals within, are bound together through the action of specific attitudes, behaviours, rules, and institutions, which rely on consensus rather than pure coercion" (Green et al., 2009, p.19). This aim to build consensus in relation to attitudes and behaviours is what makes social cohesion something to be fostered in the adolescents who will have responsibility for future society.

There is agreement among social cohesion scholars that for social cohesion to occur, there must be a sense of shared values and aspirations (Markus, 2021; Moustakas, 2023). Where social cohesion is seen as "autonomous action in support of social norms that already exist within a society" (Koonce, 2009, p. 145), it fails to acknowledge growth and changes in

societal values that result from multiculturalism and changes in society brought about by globalisation, technology, and evolution of culture. Australia's multiculturalism has made social cohesion a topic of interest not only to researchers but to policy makers at all levels of government. As well as grappling with the impact of policies on social cohesion, governments also need to navigate the impact of global wars and increasing international conflicts on relationships between ethnic groups in Australia. The impact of racial and ethnic diversity is only one aspect of social cohesion; however, the media coverage often overtakes the impact of other dimensions of social cohesion. Social cohesion is more than the social. Scholars like Judith Maxwell have highlighted the need to examine structural inequities and the role of institutions in social cohesion.

COVID-19 has tested social cohesion within communities as well as across nations (Jewett et al., 2021). Jewett et al. (2021) observe that the health measures that were meant to protect us e.g. social distancing, not visiting your neighbours or family put a strain on social capital which impacts social cohesion. A September 2021 report conducted jointly by Mission Australia and the Black Dog Institute (Tiller et. al, 2021), reveals that one in four young people are experiencing issues with mental health, and the odds of experiencing mental distress increase if they identified as female, non-binary, living with disability, or as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Adolescents who are growing up within this evolving culture are in a unique position to inform current frameworks that measure and address social cohesion. Their lived experience and their developing sense of self provides an opportunity to inform frameworks in ways that accounts for current experiences and also aims to foster social cohesion into the future.

1.4 Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature on social cohesion with some sections looking specifically at social cohesion in Australia. As social cohesion has been studied across many disciplines, the literature sources reflect various academic research disciplines. In discussing social cohesion, its domains that use every day language will be capitalised for example, Belonging. The chapter begins with a discussion on how the concept of social cohesion emerged and this is followed by definitions of social cohesion. The chapter goes on to look at different ways social cohesion has been measured abroad before focussing on how it is measured in Australia with an in-depth discussion on the Scanlon Index of social cohesion, Australia's per-eminent annual study of social cohesion. Adolescent social cohesion is then discussed and here lies the gap this research addresses. Current social cohesion domains do not include the adolescent perspective. The argument for why an adolescent perspective is needed is presented.

Chapter 3 explains the research approach and provides more input on the research site and the selection of research participants. Justification is provided for the variety methods used which include semi- structured interviews, discussion groups and photo voice. It also explains how participants were given choice as co-researchers on the methods they engaged with. The approach to data analyses, how the participants discussed emerging findings and also had an opportunity to discuss the final themes (see Chapter 4) is also discussed.

Chapter 4 presents the findings beginning with participant demographics, demonstrating some of the family stress factors impacting them. Brief introductions to the research participants under pseudonyms follow. These introductions serve to allow the reader insight into the lived experience of participants and also in some cases insights into reasons why they

may be disengaging from school. The Chapter then presents the key findings as themes that emerged from the research 1) the value of interpersonal relationships, 2) the need for extended learning and skills, 3) understanding diversity and 4) neighbourhood dynamics. Here the reader will engage with quotations from participants, images from photovoice and visual elicitation.

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the research, and provides considered responses to the research questions. It is chapter 5 that the research findings are examined alongside existing frameworks for social cohesion and the research contribution is emphasised.

Chapter 6 summarises the academic and practice implications and provides recommendations for future research. Policy makers are urged to examine how the findings of the research impact policy issues across education, out of home care, family support and policing. The Thesis ends with a plea for social cohesion with adolescents to become part of the annual conversation on social cohesion in Australia.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The following section presents a brief history of social cohesion and identifies definitions and dimensions of social cohesion across both academic and policy discussions. The definitions demonstrate the breath of the social cohesion discourse and the section ends with a caution on being too quick to place a definition on social cohesion. The chapter moves to showing how social cohesion has been measured and engages in discussion of the different domains/ dimensions/ pillars of social cohesion as posited by leading academics in the field. The literature on adolescent social cohesion is limited and therefore the literature review discusses social cohesion as a broad concept. The lack of adolescent voices in contemporary social cohesion measures is evident in this section affirming the need for an adolescent perspective. The role of institutions in social cohesion is examined and in section 2.4 research with adolescents that has included social cohesion viewpoints is discussed.

2.1. Defining Social Cohesion

French sociologist David Émile Durkheim first raised concern about the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation on what he termed the 'collective conscience' of society. Society had for most of history been guided by shared norms that were largely based on religious beliefs. Durkheim was concerned that increased differentiation between individuals would result in a more fractured society. It was from these early works that the term social cohesion emerged.

Scholars agree that the concept of social cohesion emerged from the need to understand how society evolves with changes in social order, beginning with the Industrial Revolution. Contemporary social cohesion studies include discussions of the disruption brought by

technology, globalisation and regional political instability (Green et al., 2011; Jenson, 2010; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). Societal changes occurring at an ever-increasing pace make the primary question underlying social cohesion: "How do we keep individuals working together to create evolving yet functional societies?".

Some of the definitions of social cohesion (Freud, 1921, Schneider & McDougall, 1921 as cited in Fonseca et al., 2019) found social cohesion to be evident through whether or not individuals demonstrated agreement both in thinking and in characteristics. These commonalities of thought were largely based on Eurocentric values. More contemporary research into social cohesion has criticised this lack of engagement with social cohesion concepts. It transcends Eurocentric or Enlightenment thinking and centres on diversity as a key prerequisite for social cohesion (Harris & Johns, 2020).

Judith Maxwell is credited as developing one of the early definitions of social cohesion from an institutional perspective. Maxwell defined social cohesion as follows:

> "Social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community". (Maxwell 1996, p. 13 as cited by Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008)

With this definition, Maxwell made social cohesion a process that relies on an active policy environment led by institutions resulting in a sense of togetherness within communities. The task for policy makers was to create shared values that were well communicated and understood. Another definition that acknowledges the role of institutions is by Green & Janmaat (2011) where they discussed the positioning of social cohesion along differing political ideologies.

> "Social cohesion refers to the property by which whole societies and individuals within them are bound together through the action of specific attitudes, behaviours, rules and institutions which rely on consensus rather than pure cohesion". (Green and Janmaat 20011, p 18).

Another definition emphasises the role of the groups, in that it "is the interaction and participation as a group, and the results of specific efforts toward more concrete goals, that indirectly lead toward greater social cohesion" (Koonce, 2011, p.152). This interaction of the individual and institutions within social cohesion led Chan et al. (2006) to differentiate between the interpersonal interaction of a society's individuals with each other and individuals' relation to the nation state and to institutions. They define social cohesion as:

> "… a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations." (Chan et al., 2006, p. 290)

Koonce (2011) argues that while conditions that are favourable to social cohesion can be created, social cohesion itself cannot be actively pursued citing a focus on group cohesiveness as not indicative of overall social cohesion. They are supported in this thinking by studies in public health (Williams, 2020) which have shown that social cohesion measured at a national level does not translate to community level and that a measure at community level is required to give a clearer picture of the level and impact of social cohesion within a community.

Another definition of social cohesion with a focus on building resilient cities and suited to Australia's multicultural community, where 49% of Australians are either born overseas or have one or both parents who are born overseas (ABS 2016) is

> "the ongoing process of developing wellbeing, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society" (Fonseca, et al.,2019 p. 246)

This definition recognises social cohesion as an "ongoing process" that needs to be fostered. Fonseca, et al. (2019) proposed this definition having conducted a literature review of social cohesion beginning with the most cited books and then examining the references in said books. He accompanied this with a bibliometric search of articles relevant to social cohesion. His paper is becoming one of the most cited papers on social cohesion.

The study of social cohesion in the UK was greatly influenced by the need to address racial tension following the 2001 riots (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008). This has led to the UK using the term 'community cohesion', focusing on immigration and acceptance of the other at community level. Social cohesion and community cohesion are thus differentiated as follows:

> **Social cohesion** reflects divisions based on social class and economic factors and is complemented by social capital theories relating to the 'bonding' between people and the presence of mutual trust. It is seen to be undermined by the social exclusion experienced by individuals or groups, generally by their social class and economic position.
>
> **Community cohesion** reflects divisions based upon identifiable communities, generally on the basis of faith or ethnic distinctions. It is also complemented by the social capital theory of 'bridging' between communities. It is undermined by the disadvantage, discrimination and disaffection experienced by the identifiable community as a whole.
> (Cantle, 2005, p52 as cited in Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008) emphasis added.

While community cohesion addresses some of the dimensions within social cohesion, it does pose a challenge for policy makers because various cohesive communities can form which do not tolerate each other. This is being evidenced by an increasing polarisation of thought around the world. Furthermore, focusing social cohesion to issues of migration narrows its potential. The role of those born within a nation becomes simply tolerating the new arrivals, with the role of creating opportunities for understanding the other left to civil society and government. I see this focus on social cohesion as moving too close to integration or assimilation, a view supported by the assertion by Harris (2013) that social cohesion in

Australia is often leaning towards Anglo-Celtic values and morality. A society that is cohesive does not have to have similar thoughts about all things. In fact, the opposite is true; social cohesion allows for a commonality of purpose and values while allowing for differences of opinion. This thinking is supported by other academics who have asserted that governments have often misused and misunderstood social cohesion (Jenson, 1998).

Bernard (1999) cautions against settling too soon on a definition of social cohesion and suggests that social cohesion must remain nebulous in its definition as he considers it an instrument of politicians who must remain flexible to changing political landscapes. This flexibility of concept is a source of frustration for some scholars who feel that the term is understood in such contradicting ways that different audiences assign their own interpretation to calls for social cohesion (Swain & Urban, 2024). Scholars are yet to agree on a single definition of social cohesion; as Jenson (1998) states "there is no single way of even defining it" (social cohesion). Meanings depend on the problem being addressed and who is speaking'' (Jenson, 1998, p. 17 as cited in Chan et al., 2006). Social cohesion then, becomes an active concept that adapts itself to society and ensures society continues to engage with moralities of equality and social justice.

Though there are many definitions of social cohesion and many concepts to draw upon in measuring it, there is agreement that social cohesion can only occur when behaviours and social rules and values are entered into voluntarily. For social cohesion to be present, members of a society must trust each other and must trust those who govern society. Social cohesion has been linked to a measure of the level of trust among individuals in a country; particularly to trust in citizens who are not known personally (Larsen, 2014). Larsen states that "the most important aspect of social cohesion is that citizens believe they share the norm

of not cheating each other" (Larsen, 2014, p. 11). While this level of trust is difficult to achieve particularly in multicultural and highly differentiated nations, they noted its importance in the success of said nations. Their definition links with the conclusion of Green et al. (2006) that social cohesion cannot co-exist with coercion. Larsen's position is premised on the fact that we trust those we know and social cohesion exists when we can trust those we do not know. However, this definition may prove challenging in a world where there is increasing migration, both voluntary and forced, and where the media's portrayal of "those not known" may not engender trust. One would then argue that the role of fostering social cohesion would be to make the "unknown citizen known'. The role of the media and how it portrays minority groups is noted in studies relating to social cohesion among refugees (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2015).

A criticism of the way social cohesion is used within government frameworks is that it is often a means to direct people's behaviours and making them more governable (Moran & Mallman, 2019). A society that is cohesive does not have to have similar thoughts about all things.

2.2 Measuring Social Cohesion

Social cohesion has been researched within many disciplines and via various methodologies, often with a psycho-social approach (Fonseca et al., 2019; Harris & Johns, 2020). The social cohesion discourse has evolved in both academic research and policy circles. The differing approaches to measuring social cohesion evidence the nuanced nature of the concept and have advanced understanding of the notion and its implications at individual and national levels. Clarifying the concept of social cohesion is impeded in contemporary research by the lack of agreement with the juxtaposition it finds itself in. It is popular within the political

sphere as a way in which to keep societies in order and the people more governable (Moran & Mallman, 2019). It has morphed the concept into one that helps identify issues (presented as dimension or domains) that if neglected could lead to disorder (Bottoni, 2018).

Defining the complexities within an ever-evolving modern society has consequences for researchers in terms of how a concept is researched and analysed in the future. For this reason, several researchers, beginning with Jane Jensen, have moved towards an explanation of social cohesion through identified dimensions and domains rather than seeking a definition. (Beauvais & Jenson, 2002 as cited in Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008 and in Chan et al., 2006).

Jenson (1998) analysed literature relating to social cohesion and identified five dimensions and proposed a framework that has shaped the policy discourse on social cohesion and is cited as being one of the most compressive frameworks encompassing psycho-social as well as economic factors (Chan & et al., 2006; Moran & Mallman, 2019). Jenson (1998)" s dimensions of social cohesion, build on the work of Judith Maxwell. Her dimensions focus on both the institutional and psycho-social aspects of social cohesion.

Her first domain addresses issues of belonging: do people feel like they belong to the same community or country and do they think they share the same values as their fellow citizens? She called this dimension Affiliation/Isolation. Her next Domain Insertion/Exclusion examines whether there are equal opportunities within the workplace or marketplace and whether everyone has access to the same opportunities. Participation/Passivity is about people's willingness to be active in civic and political spheres. This is measured by how often people volunteer, if they are participating in protests and or writing to their political

representatives about matters that affect them. Acceptance/Rejection examines the tolerance people have towards those who are considered different, or are minority groups in society. Finally, Legitimacy/Illegitimacy examines fairness of public and private institutions and whether the diversity within society is reflected in institutional policies and actions.
Bernard (1999) expanded on Jenson's work by differentiating between Substantial relations which focus on behavioural components, and formal relations which focus on attitudes and values within society. He also distinguished between economic, political and sociocultural domains.

In 2011, Acket et al. conducted a quantitative study based on the European values study conducted in 39 countries in 2008. They developed the VALCOS Index on micro data that focused on both subjective and objective measures of social cohesion. The VALCOS Index also draws from the work of Bernard and Jenson and considers the following six dimensions; Trust in institutions, Solidarity, Political Participation, Sociocultural Participation, Formal Relations, and Substantial Relations. It is clear from these and other approaches that a multi-dimensional approach is required to assess social cohesion.
The distinction between objective (behavioural) and subjective (relational) measures was introduced by Chan et al. (2006). Their contribution will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.

In Australia, the Mapping Social Cohesion Survey has been conducted yearly since 2007 and informs the Scanlon Social Cohesion Index. This research began in 2007 as an annual longitudinal study commissioned by the Scanlon Foundation and led by Professor Andrew Markus of Monash University. This research has ensured that social cohesion remained at the forefront of conversations and policies in relation to Australia's social growth, its

multicultural society and immigration. In measuring social cohesion in Australia, the Scanlon Index focuses on five domains namely: Belonging; Social justice and equity; Participation; Acceptance/rejection and legitimacy; and Worth.

These measures were adapted from earlier domains and can be briefly explained as:

> **Belonging:** examines how Australian's feel about the "Australian way of life" and whether they are proud to belong to Australia. It also examines the importance of maintaining Australian values
>
> **Worth:** examines whether people are secure financially and whether they have felt happy in the last year.
>
> **Social justice and equity:** explores whether people think current social support systems are sufficient for those in financial difficulties, gaps between high-and low-income households, and Australia as a land of opportunity.
>
> **Participation (political):** refers to active involvement in the Australian political system e.g. voting, engaging with political leaders, protesting.
>
> **Acceptance and rejection, legitimacy:** refers to views on migration both from new immigrants (discrimination) and citizens (acceptance). What people think of government policies on migration and multiculturalism.

The following table outlines the dimensions/domains that have been used to measure social cohesion in the late 1990s, and how these were built upon by Markus and Dharmalingam to create the Scanlon Social Cohesion Dimensions.

TABLE 2.1 SUMMARY OF DOMAINS

Author	Jenson (1998)	Bernard (1999)	Acket et al. (2011)	Markus & Dharmalingam, (2008)
Identified dimensions	Proposed 5 dimensions of social cohesion	Proposed 3 main domains and the concept of formal or attitudinal dimensions as well as substantial, behavioural. Added a 6th to Jenson's 5 dimensions	Developed the VALCOS Index	Developed the Scanlon-Monash Index Identified six domains of social cohesion

	Belonging/Isolation: a sense of being a part of – belonging, shared values	Economic and Attitudinal Insertion or exclusion: Opportunities in job market Substantial Equality or inequality: equality in chances to get the job and conditions of employment	Trust in institutions	Belonging shared values, identification with Australia, trust
			Solidarity	Social justice and equity – evaluation of national policies
	Inclusion/ exclusion: who is able to participate in the labour market and who does not	Political Legitimacy or illegitimacy: maintenance of public and private institutions which act as mediators Participation or passivity: involvement in management of public affairs, third sector (in opposition to political disenchantment)	Political Participation	Participation – voluntary work, political and cooperative involvement
	Participation/ Non-Involvement. Involvement in civic society including ability to participate		Sociocultural participation	Acceptance (and rejection), legitimacy: experience of discrimination, attitudes towards minorities, newcomers
	Recognition/ rejection: how individuals tolerate differences and how they perceive their differences to be tolerate	Sociocultural Acceptance or rejection: pluralism in facts and also as a virtue i.e. tolerance in differences Affiliation or isolation: share of common values, feeling of belonging to a same community	Formal relations	Worth – life satisfaction and happiness, future expectations
	Legitimacy/ illegitimacy: Trust in institutions and political systems do institutions represent everyone fairly?		Substantial relations	

Since the Scanlon-Monash Index began, there has been a slight decline in social cohesion in Australia however, the Index has remained consistent over the 7 years to 2019. In the 2019

survey, 90% of respondents indicated a ‘sense of belonging to Australia’ from a moderate to great extent. The domains in the Scanlon-Monash Index are drawn from the work of Jenson and Bernard and are echoed in the VALCOS Index formulated by Acket et al. (2011).

Over the last five years, the Scanlon Index has shown that during the pandemic, social cohesion moved in a positive direction, reflecting increased social cohesion as communities and individuals made decisions for the common good in the fight against COVID19. The Social Justice and Equality Index showed a sharp rise and was attributed to government support for individuals and business during the pandemic, with initiatives like job keeper and increases in the job seeker payment. The following year saw a decline in this domain as social supports were withdrawn and an overall decline in social cohesion. The decline continued in 2023 and is attributed to socioeconomic pressures.

The Scanlon Index has changed the way it measures belonging. In the past, questions asked participants about belonging to Australia and spoke of an “Australian way of life”. In 2022, these questions were changed to bring emphasis to neighbourhood belonging. The new questions are shown below.

TABLE 2.2 SCANLON BELONGING QUESTIONS

The redeveloped belonging index incorporated the following additional survey items:

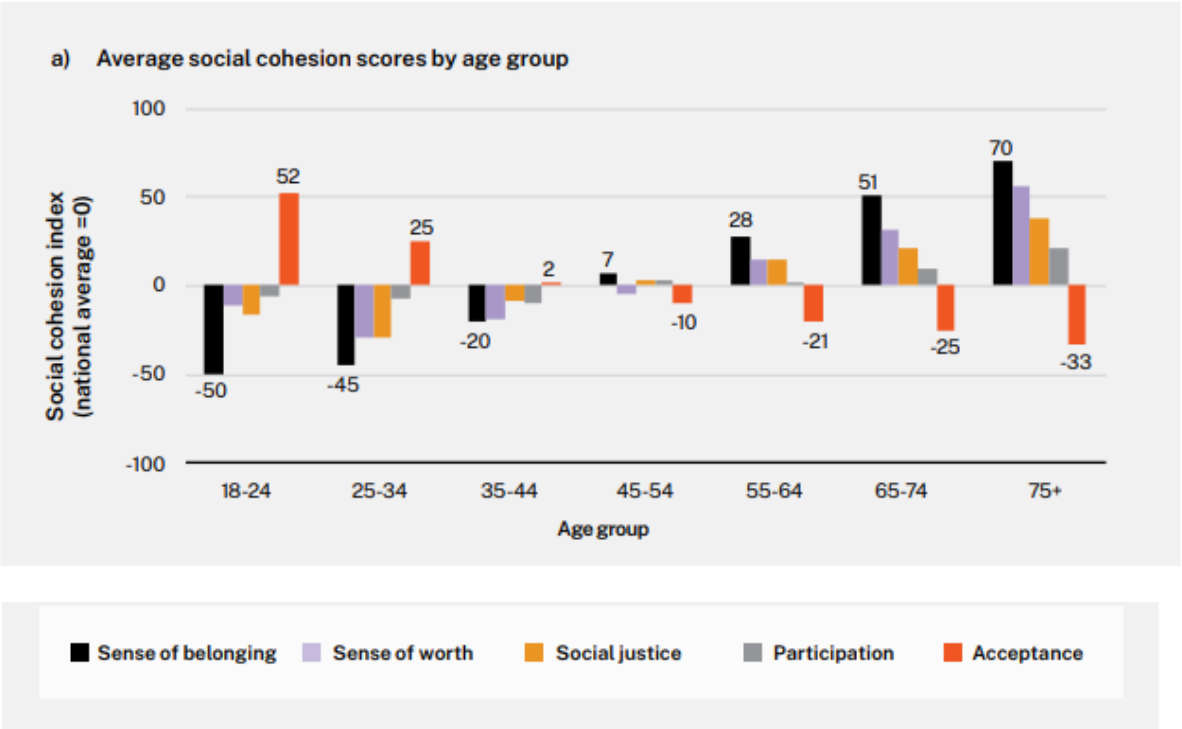
1. ‘How safe do you feel at home by yourself during the day?’
2. ‘I feel like I belong in my neighbourhood.’
3. ‘My neighbourhood has a strong sense of community.’
4. ‘How often do you feel isolated from others?’

Source: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

These questions now explore issues of neighbourhood safety and a sense of community in the neighbourhood. Since the changes to the questions, the belonging index has shown that

younger Australians have had a lower sense of belonging that older Australians. Belonging was also lower for those who are on lower incomes or struggling financially. The figures from the 2024 Mapping Social Cohesion Report findings are presented in Figure 2.1. the numbers show greater Acceptance in younger Australians with figures decreasing with age.

FIGURE 2.1 2024 MAPPING SOCIAL COHESION REPORT



(Scanlon, 2024, p. 21)

The Scanlon Index leads the conversation on social cohesion in Australia and both media and policy makers engage in the findings of the report. Including the voice of adolescent Australians in this or a similar survey would include them in decisions that impact policy and therefore their futures.

As mentioned in 2.1, Chan et al. (2006) proposed a framework that differentiated between subjective and objective components of social cohesion. They proposed a two-by-two

framework, explaining it via horizontal and vertical concepts and their behavioural manifestations. The horizontal component relates to how people interact with each other as individuals and groups within society. This includes interactions with those considered to be in minority groups and also whether or not individuals and groups support each other. The vertical component is people's relationship with the state or institutions that represent the state, including political parties and the state's relationship with citizens as represented by civic bodies. The subjective and objective components argue for a distinction between people's personal views (e.g., do they trust others, do they feel that they belong?) with people's action (e.g., do they vote, do they volunteer?).

TABLE 2.3 MEASURING SOCIAL COHESION: A TWO-BY-TWO FRAMEWORK

	Subjective Component (People's state of mind)	Objective component (behavioural manifestations)
Horizontal dimension (cohesion within society)	General trust with fellow citizens	Social participation and vibrancy of civil society
	Willingness to cooperate and help fellow citizens including those from other socio groups	Voluntarism and donations
	Sense of belonging or identity	Presence or absence of major intergroup alliances or cleavages
Vertical dimension (State – citizen cohesion)	Trust in public figures	Political participation (e.g. voting, political parties etc.)
	Confidence in political and other major social institutions	

(Chan et al., 2006 p 294)

Chan et al. (2006), like Schiefer and Van der Noll (2017), remove socioeconomic factors like poverty and unemployment from social cohesion. While recognising the often-malleable definitions and framework for social cohesion, Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) argue that there are a lot of similarities in the concept. They propose limiting the dimensions of social cohesion to:

1. Social relations, which includes quality of relationship between individuals with an emphasis on social networks and trust that leads people to help each other, creating cohesion.
2. Identification, which is the sense of belonging individuals have with their community which again leads to communal support and a sense of collective action towards shared goals.
3. Orientation towards the common good, which reflects individuals' ability to look beyond their personal interests to the needs of the community as a whole.

Their dimensions leave out the important dimensions that cover the role of governments and institutions in fostering or indeed enabling a decline in social cohesion. This thinking is supported by other scholars who have identified the lack of equal opportunities and belief in social mobility as a risk to social cohesion (Green et al., 2011). The absence of socioeconomic and structural factors in their proposals leaves marginalised groups vulnerable as underlying factors contributing to their marginalisation may remain unexamined.

The study of social cohesion through varying dimensions and domains solidifies its identification as something evolving through a process rather than as a state of being (Larsen, 2014). It is this process of fostering social cohesion that should be the focus of interventions addressing social cohesion. Durkheim's concerns on differentiation in the early 19th century demonstrate how society's tendency to change needs the support of a continuous constructivist process of social cohesion.

Social cohesion may have fallen prey to the structural inequities that can be perpetuated by institutions not remaining fully examined in contemporary social cohesion research. This thesis is concerned particularly with the adolescent perspective. Their interaction with institutions in their daily lives will add to academic understanding of how social cohesion can be supported. The measures for social cohesion are not often translated for young people and in Australia's annual survey, adolescent voices are not included at all.

2.3 Social Cohesion and Institutions

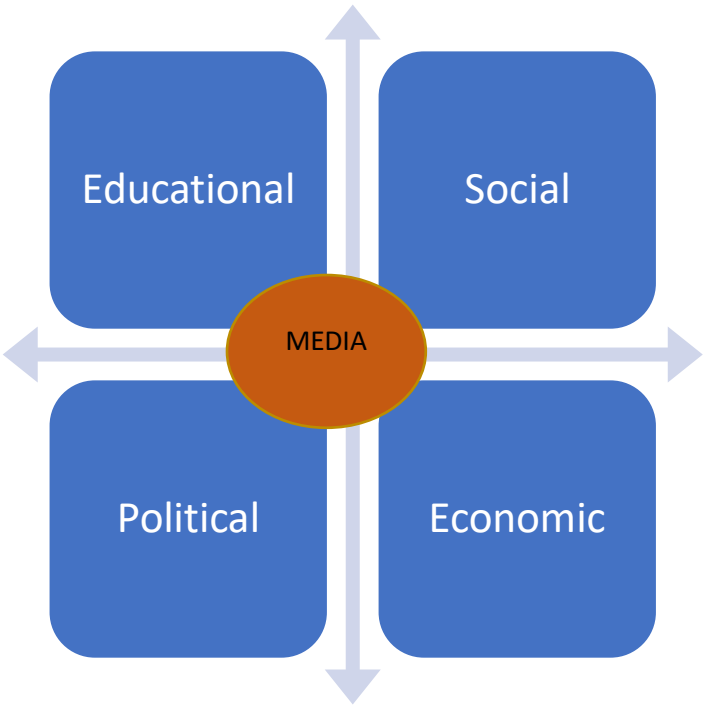
While social cohesion research at individual and community level has been useful in developing the field and identifying areas for policy development, the same scrutiny has not been afforded to institutions and how their role in society is affecting social cohesion. Institutions have a key role in shaping policies that build trust, are inclusive, and address societal inequities (Fonseca et al., 2019). For social cohesion to exist, citizens must be able to trust institutions to act in trustworthy ways that provide a stable structure for individuals and communities to work together and to build intergroup trust. Other scholars acknowledge the role of institutions in social cohesion demonstrating the need for structural considerations in studies on social cohesion (Koonce, 2011). In Bernard's (1999) political domain, the role of institutions both public and private is to be 'mediators' in society. When this mediating role is not effective it can lead to a disconnect between institutions and their publics undermining trust (Macnamara, 2016, 2021).

Within social cohesion studies, the role of institutions is often reflected as the state-society relationship (Chan et al., 2006; Fiedler & Rohles, 2021) or in what Schiefer and Van der Noll (2017, p. 585) term the "distributive dimension". However, both Chan et al. (2006) and Schiefer and Van der Noll (2017) remove socioeconomic factors from their social cohesion

frameworks. Macnamara (2021) writes about the relationship of institutions (public and private) and their publics and that "All organizations attract expectations from their stakeholders and need to live up to stated commitments" (Macnamara 2021, p. 256). Institutions are responsible for the equal or unequal allocation of resources to their citizens and institutional responses impact social cohesion.

Four types of institutions that affect social cohesion are shown in Figure 2.4, and each of their roles explained in the paragraphs below. These institutions address governance, a person's ability to progress through education and work and the social supports and recreational opportunities available (Koonce, 2011).

FIGURE 2.4 KEY INSTITUTIONS THAT AFFECT SOCIAL COHESION



Political institutions determine the governance of the nation. Political freedom, the ability to support a party of choice and free and fair elections are also important for supporting social

cohesion. In Australia, we are witnessing the impact that political posturing over the Israeli-Gaza conflict is having on Australians. The impact of government and senior political figures is amplified because their words influence large groups of people, and often whole nations (Koonce, 2011). Democratic systems are seen as supportive of social cohesion through their emphasis on citizen participation and one vote for all.

Education settings are instrumental for the development of social cohesion (Green & Janmaat, 2011). They offer opportunities for interactions by individuals of different backgrounds allowing for the intercultural/racial learning which is essential for multicultural nations (Veerman & Denessen, 2021). Education also offers an opportunity to address socioeconomic disadvantage and supports domains in social cohesion, such as Bernard's (1999) Economic domain, Markus and Dharmaligham (2007)'s Worth domain, and Jenson's (1998) Inclusion/Exclusion domain.

Economic organisations are critical for social cohesion through the provision of employment supporting individual's socioeconomic outlooks. Sometimes, these organisations are criticised as causing risk to social cohesion because of their profit making aims that may not support the common good (Koonce, 2011). These perceptions are influenced by what Green & Janmaat (2011) term the regimes of social cohesion which determine how nations interact with economic institutions for social cohesion. Green & Janmaat (2011) articulate these as regime: 1) liberal, which emphasise market forces determined by supply and demand 2) social market, where the government plays a role in ensuring the market remains fair, with instruments like wage agreements, parental leave etc. 3) social democratic, which are societies with greater state intervention creating similarities in wages and with greater social

support. While modern democracies favour the liberal regime, there are risks to social cohesion in all the regimes.

Social institutions include religious organisations, civic bodies, sporting groups etc. making the category quite broad. It is these institutions, in particular religious institutions, that used to influence the values and norms of a society (Koonce, 2011). These and other civic bodies promote participation and support society's outworking of the common good by providing the mechanisms through which individuals can support those that are in need. During the COVID-19 outbreak, local grassroots organisations were critical in ensuring those most vulnerable were identified and supported. Governments also quickly realised the importance of working with civic society to translate and communicate critical health information.

The four institutions in Figure 2.4 above are discussed to demonstrate their role in supporting social cohesion as well as the risk that they bring to social cohesion. Another type of institution which spans all four is the media and the emerging social media. Dandy and Pe-Pua (2013)'s critical research identified the role of the media in fuelling racism and discrimination in intercultural contact. This role can negatively impact how people from refugee or minority backgrounds interact with the existing social cohesion framework and highlight the risk to social cohesion from racism and discrimination.

As well as their role in supporting social cohesion, of particular interest is how institutions listen to their public(s). As mentioned earlier, in Bernard's (1999) political domain, the role of institutions both public and private is to be 'mediators' in society. Therefore, the institutions' ability to mediate on behalf of and within community is strongly tied to their ability to hear what society is saying. This listening ability is important when discussing

issues impacting young people who do not have representations and are not able to engage with policy making and advocacy.

Within institutions, there is what has been identified as "a crisis of listening" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 314) in private, non-government and public organisations. He discusses the tendencies of organisations to focus on the message they are sending into the public with few mechanisms to hear what the public is saying back. Macnamara proposes an *architecture of listening* that is made up of listening culture, politics, policies, resources, skills, systems, technologies, and articulation of what is learned to decision makers and policy makers (Macnamara, 2018, p. 12). While a detailed study into institutions' listening practices and their impact on social cohesion will not form part of this study, it is an area identified during the literature review as worth investigating. The study will however, consider how young people are interacting with the institutions in their lives and their perspective on how the institutions support or do not support social cohesion.

This thesis explains social cohesion from an adolescent viewpoint in relation to the world that they are growing up in, and suggests a consistent framework for adolescent social cohesion. A framework for adolescent social cohesion provides a platform for advocacy, policy development, important conversations on the way that young people are experiencing the world, and how the future can be built with the participation of young people. Ultimately, this research is about creating a platform that is not only about young people speaking, but about parents, service providers, policy makers and governments listening (Macnamara, 2016).

Since the Scanlon-Monash Index was introduced, there has been a slight decline in social cohesion in Australia. However, the Index has remained consistent over the seven years to

2019. In the 2019 survey, 90% of respondents indicated a 'sense of belonging' to Australia to a moderate to great extent. In 2020, the index showed an increase in all five domains. The highest change was seen in the social justice domain and this change is attributed to the policies put in place to support individuals out of work and employers during the COVID-19 outbreak. Since 2022, there has been a decline in social cohesion attributed to the socioeconomic pressures and increasing global destabilisation.

Government bodies have also engaged with the social cohesion framework, including Multicultural NSW whose 2025 Strategic Plan aims to build upon social cohesion and language understanding. Understandably, their strategy for social cohesion is aimed at immigrants and refugee settlement. Their policy asks for people to show a "unified commitment to Australia, its interests and future", irrespective of their linguistic, religious and ancestral backgrounds.

The Human Rights Commission has developed an online resource titled *Building Social Cohesion in Our Communities* as an interactive tool for local governments to support social cohesion in their communities. It is based on eight elements: 1) getting the local government body ready, 2) using a measure like the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion in their community, 3) reviewing organisation policies including recruiting practice, 4) assigning responsibilities for social cohesion and making social cohesion a priority. The other four elements centre around 5) community engagement, 6) building partnerships with business and the community, 7) taking a place-based strategy approach, and 8) evaluating their actions. This framework supports the Australian National Anti-Racism Strategy which is currently under review. A number of councils, including Blacktown City Council where this research was conducted, have implemented the recommendations from the interactive tool.

Post the 2021 COVID-19 lockdown, the Department of Communities and Justice held online workshops titled 'Safeguarding Social Cohesion during COVID-19' aimed at community-facing workers to help them support their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. These capacity-building workshops were aimed at supporting organisations to work together, but also had another motive of negating disinformation and misinformation regarding health mandates such as vaccinations and isolation when unwell.

There has been criticism of the governments' approaches to social cohesion and the influence that those delivering 'intervention' programs has perpetuating a social cohesion agenda that may not acknowledge localised inequalities. However, research on workers within the Local, State, and Federal governments and the NFP sector found that building a sense of 'community' acknowledged the nuances that diversity brought in access to services or ability to fully engage with society (Moran & Mallman, 2019). Moran and Mallman (2019) found that those working in the community were cognisant of structural inequalities and championed social justice and equality. Their argument is that social cohesion as a framework, though flawed and vulnerable to manipulation, is an important framework in building a more inclusive community.

2.4 Adolescent Social Cohesion

Having looked at social cohesion and its implications broadly, the following section highlights the literature that links social cohesion to adolescent outcomes. The framing of social cohesion agendas in Australia has shaped conversations and policies about who the targets of social cohesion interventions should be. This section also looks at how social cohesion has been linked to adolescents in research.

One of the findings from the 2019 Mapping Social Cohesion Survey report was that 40% of young people aged 18-24 who responded to the survey were pessimistic or very pessimistic about Australia's future. Adolescent Australians are not included in the survey. Mission Australia conducts an annual survey of young people aged 15-19 which touches on some of the issues that relate to social cohesion at the individual level. In the 2019 survey, the top three concerns for young people in Australia were mental health (36%), the environment (34%) and equity/discrimination (25%). Social cohesion has been shown to affect mental wellbeing (William et al. 2020) and the Mission Australia report (Carlisle et al., 2019) highlights the top personal concerns of young people include coping with stress (45%), school or study problems (34%) and mental health (33%). All of these point towards the need for improved understanding of aspects in order to support improvements in adolescent mental wellbeing.

There is however limited academic literature on social cohesion frameworks for adolescents. A UNICEF (2019) study proposed the following factors as impacting social cohesion in children:

- they feel consulted, listened to, and understood.
- they have good relationships with adults.
- they are treated equally.
- friends are present.
- trust is present both vertically and horizontally.
- they have and understand clear structures of help.
- there is freedom of expression and participation.
- everyone is included in activities.
- there is an absence of violence and bullying, both vertical and horizontal.
  (UNICEF Jordan 2019, p 10)

These factors were proposed following research with children in Jordan. At the time of the UNICEF research, 30% of children under 18 living in Jordan were non-Jordanian. This number included children living in Jordan as refugees. The focus of this research was to create a definition for social cohesion in children as well as create an instrument that measures social cohesion among adolescents. Their study agreed with previous findings in identifying the following indicators for social cohesion Belonging and Inclusion, Participation, and Tolerance (Jenson, 1998, Bernard, 1999, Chan et al., 2006).

The factors proposed by UNICEF Jordan were the first to my knowledge that sought to elicit social cohesion from children's perspective. There is however a marked contextual and demographic difference in the Jordanian study and the proposed research as outlined here. Australia is an island and separated from many of the world's conflict areas by thousands of kilometres of ocean, so refugee entrants in Australia, including applicant families, totalled only 6000 for 2016 (ABS, 2016). Despite this low number of humanitarian entrants, Australia is home to many people of diverse cultures and life experiences.

There are arguments about social cohesion being in decline and globalisation, immigration, changes in family composition and civil unrest have all been blamed. There is, therefore, an opportunity for a framework for adolescent social cohesion that builds towards a less fragmented society. A criticism of social cohesion as a national concept is that many people do not know what it means (Lewis et al., 2019). This research contributes to an understanding of social cohesion through engaging young people in discussions about social cohesion and in allowing them to bring their point of view to the current domains.

Social cohesion in Australia is strongly linked to issues of multiculturalism, marginalisation and social justice (Keddie et al., 2019; Markus & Druzenko, 2007; Stead, 2017). In fact, other scholars see the move to social cohesion as a framework as a response to the perceived failures of multiculturalism. The language used in the mid to late 2000s around multiculturalism and social cohesion seemed a return to integrationist agendas that sought to minimise diversity emerging from the people from multiple ethnic backgrounds now settled in Australia (Harris, 2010). Those in need of social cohesion were the multicultural immigrants and the presence of racism in the population was not accounted for. This move by policy makers under the guise of social cohesion was concerning and some scholars deemed social cohesion a redundant concept. Harris (2010), is particularly opposed to social cohesion agendas that focus on integration where integration is seen is affirming Anglo values.

In engaging with the social cohesion discourse, it is important to consider it as an ideal to be worked towards. Immigration has seen shifts in culture, traditions and values which in Durkheim's functionalist theory was evidence of social cohesion. This has caused some disagreement in academia and has been manipulated by far-right policy agendas. The absence of conflict is not implicit in a society that has social cohesion nor does conflict mean that there is no social cohesion. Societal tensions can exist within groups that appear to live peacefully. These can then show up as a lack of trust and cooperation undermining social cohesion at a deeper level (Fiedler & Rohles, 2021). Autocratic states may also exert control that discourages conflict, thus creating an artificial peace. Fear rather than trust becomes the uniting force and citizens develop an orientation towards survival rather than an orientation towards the common good. Focusing on lack of conflict may also mask or ignore inequalities that exist for certain groups within society. Marginalised groups may find it difficult to express or demonstrate their exclusion (Langer et al., 2017).

When social cohesion emerged to prominence as a policy tool, researchers moved away from the absence of conflict as an indicator of social cohesion. Judith Maxwell's (1997) definition discussed earlier focuses on commonalities evident and sought through a process of societal construction. Shared values become an evolving construction rather than an assimilation into existing values. This definition aligns with Structuration Theory where the individual is an agent of influence active in the creation, maintenance and disruption of social order (Giddens, 1984). The focus then is building a sense of togetherness based on trust. There is evidence of this acceptance and societal construction in studies on multicultural suburbs and young people's negotiation of living with diverse groups (Harris, 2014). Harris (2014) sees an acceptance to live together with difference expressed by the young people which she terms productive relationality (Harris 2014, p. 571). While many academics prefer to describe social cohesion than define it, conviviality is central to modern understandings of social cohesion. Harris' study describes what seems a forced evolution through interaction and she cautions that this "did not emerge from shared values, entirely good feelings or an absence of conflict" and is in effect an involuntary "good enough every day multiculturalism …" (Harris 2014, p. 584). In her 2014 study, the communities did not exhibit explicit ingroups or outgroups as the young people felt surrounded by diversity. This process of forced interactions that young people undergo in schools and public spaces is what becomes the backbone of fostering social cohesion through a demonstration of our common humanity. A continuous co-creation of society through mutual understanding and the recognition of the need to build trust.

While the association of interventions aimed at social cohesion recognise the vulnerability that migrant cultures often have in settling into Australia, the risk to social cohesion is not limited to these groups. Lack of engagement with youth who turn to far-right groups is

evidence of this disconnect (Lewis et al., 2019). Intervention programs that have sought to foster social cohesion have not been able to sufficiently engage participants from Anglo/European/Caucasian backgrounds (Stead, 2017). Lennings et al. (2010), as cited by Harris and Johns (2020), recognise the risk factors that often lead 'white' young people to seek a sense of belonging and purpose within extremist groups as rooted in a lack of connection to parents or community. There is clearly a need for the social cohesion conversation and research to go beyond the straightforwardly identifiable vulnerable groups to encompass all young people.

Research into adolescent social cohesion has focused on measuring an individual's social cohesion in relation to behaviour characteristics (Kalolo et al., 2019), school environment (van den Bos et al., 2018), areas in conflict (Presler-Marshall, 2019), and culturally and linguistically diverse groups (Johns, 2014a; Keddie et al., 2019). Research has also been conducted on education and its impact on social cohesion (Khan, 2019).

Studies in neighbourhood social cohesion have linked social cohesion with mental health outcomes in young people (Breedvelt et al., 2022; Fone et al., 2014; Kingsbury et al., 2015). These studies demonstrated that factors linked to social cohesion (trust, feelings of safety and belonging and willingness to help others) were associated with fewer mental health problems including anxiety and depression. Findings by Kingsbury et al. (2019) strongly indicate that efforts to improve social cohesion in community will result in a positive impact on future mental health. What is of great significance in this research is the finding that young people in communities with high social cohesion were more able to adjust and recover from stressful life events than those in neighbourhoods that did not have high social cohesion. In Taiwanese youth, neighbourhood social cohesion and collective efficacy were associated with higher

subjective wellbeing. This was true in urban as well as rural areas, suggesting that cohesive communities universally support adolescent wellbeing (Wang & Fowler, 2019). Social cohesion generally promotes positive behaviours; however, there is evidence that it can also have negative effects. For instance, higher social cohesion in certain communities has been linked to an increase in risky behaviours among adolescents like binge drinking, illustrating that the influence of cohesive groups can sometimes lead to detrimental outcomes (Martins et al., 2017).

Families and social cohesion

Social cohesion academics have over the years noted the importance of the family unit in social cohesion (Beaujot & Ravanera, 2001; Cheng et al., 2021; Jenson, 2002). A study in Hong Kong found that family cohesion positively influences adolescents' sense of social responsibility. This relationship was mediated by the adolescents' interdependent self-construal and social trust, demonstrating the importance of cohesive family environments in fostering responsible social behaviours(Cheng et al., 2021).

There is an assumption that adolescent cohesion is similar to adult social cohesion. However, we know that adolescents' and children's experiences of the world are markedly different. Using the pillars of social cohesion that are measured within the Scanlon-Monash Index (Belonging; Social Justice and Equity; Participation; Acceptance, Rejection, and Legitimacy; and Worth), the level of understanding, interpretation, and engagement by adults with these themes would be different from adolescents. Issues around acceptance and rejection focus on acceptance of and acceptance by those who are not "like us". Within adolescent studies, adolescents' experiences and responses to exclusion or exclusionary behaviour was found to be more acute than that of their immigrant parents (Johns, 2014). This is because adolescents

saw the rejection as coming from their peers (same birth country, education, life experience) whereas their parent's approach to the world was that they were different by virtue of being immigrants.

Harris and Johns (2020) also note that social cohesion as it relates to adolescents is often addressed in the offline world and they encourage its extension into online spaces through a global digital citizenship approach. Harris (2010) contests the current frameworks of social cohesion as excluding young people's real experience of civic engagement. She further argues against the definitions of community that are space bound or relate to a particular geographical space. She draws on her research with young people on civic engagement and social connection as well as a symposium for young people in Brisbane in which she was a participant. Her research found that young people's sense of community went beyond their spatial environment and included online communities that were spread across many geographies and facilitated through online communities of engagement.

There is a growing body of research acknowledging digital ways of belonging. Research now considers the impact of virtual communities and online interactions on individuals' sense of belonging, acknowledging that digital spaces can significantly influence feelings of connection and community in both positive and negative ways. Community therefore has to go beyond place-based notions and include online forms that young people engage with extending the belonging domain in social cohesion.

Harris (2010) further challenges participation measures within social cohesion frameworks that focus on traditional and adult forms of participation such as voting, belonging to a political party, protest and volunteering (Markus & Druzenko, 2007). The young people in

their study demonstrated participation in civic debates with friends and through online forums. Civic participation for young people was more informal and associated with friendship groups and she asserts that these informal ways of participating are neither acknowledged nor included in the current social cohesion agenda. The young people in her study spoke of adult mistrust in their forms of engagement when said engagements are not adult-controlled. She also notes that young people by virtue of being under 18 are already excluded from traditional forms of participation and she argues that their way of participation needs to be acknowledged within social cohesion frameworks. Her position is affirmed by the structure and target age groups of Australia's pre-eminent measure of social cohesion: the Scanlon Index. Adult participation in Australia is centred on choice, one may choose to join a political party, one may choose to volunteer etc. This assumption of choice is another of Harris's concerns when considering social cohesion from a young person's perspective.

The popular framing of social cohesion in Australia addresses issues of immigration, race, religion and belonging. This demonstrates the tendency towards risk prevention strategies when considering the challenges that young people face with social cohesion (Harris & Johns, 2020). Current societal challenges demand a move away from an immigration focus for social cohesion to one that considers society as a whole, and which includes young people from all backgrounds.

2.5 Theoretical Framing of the study

Émile Durkheim, in his Structural Functionalism theory, identified the complexity of social order and the role that individual parts had to play to create and recreate stability. The interconnectedness of society meant that disruption in one part of the system influenced the

others, much like when one part of the body is in pain, the whole body is affected. Durkheim was concerned with the role that traditions, institutions (judiciary, religious, government) and ensuing societal norms had in fostering social cohesion. Durkheim's idea was that there is a collective conscience of society and it is this that supports social cohesion. In his theory, institutions play a key role in encouraging and enforcing this conscience through maintaining particular shared norms and values.

Functionalism is evident in social cohesion policies that privilege shared norms and values and, in the past, some of these policies have driven an assimilation agenda. This approach by policy makers has been highly critiqued by scholars who see this pliability of a social cohesion agenda as a major failing of social cohesion as a concept. Policies that assume that for social cohesion to occur, citizens must adopt shared values, are often framed from nationalist perspectives. In Australia, this was seen in historical integration policies such as Assimilation where First Nations people and non-Anglo immigrants had to conform to a particular way of living. Under the White Australia Policy, institutions led the privileging of one race and one culture over others. and First Nations young people were taken from their families and forced to live in boarding schools or with white families resulting in the Stolen Generation (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997). Social cohesion was seen as equal to sameness which as argued in 2.1 is a limitation on understanding social cohesion.

Durkheim's contribution to social cohesion still stands as the role of institutions in social cohesion cannot be ignored. While the White Australia policy has been abolished and Australia has moved to multiculturalism, remnants of the policy still remain. Debates on "The Australian Way", immigration quotas, radicalisation and increasingly youth crime often bring up isolationist thinking. Social Cohesion studies must critically analyse the role of institutions

as Australia's cultural diversity in a global environment can result in tensions when discussing shared national values (Boucher & Samad 2016).

We must not ignore the inequalities that can be perpetuated through institutions in social cohesion studies. As mentioned in 2.4 the study will not look at individual institution's listening practices but will consider young people's perspectives on their interaction with the institutions in their day to day lives.

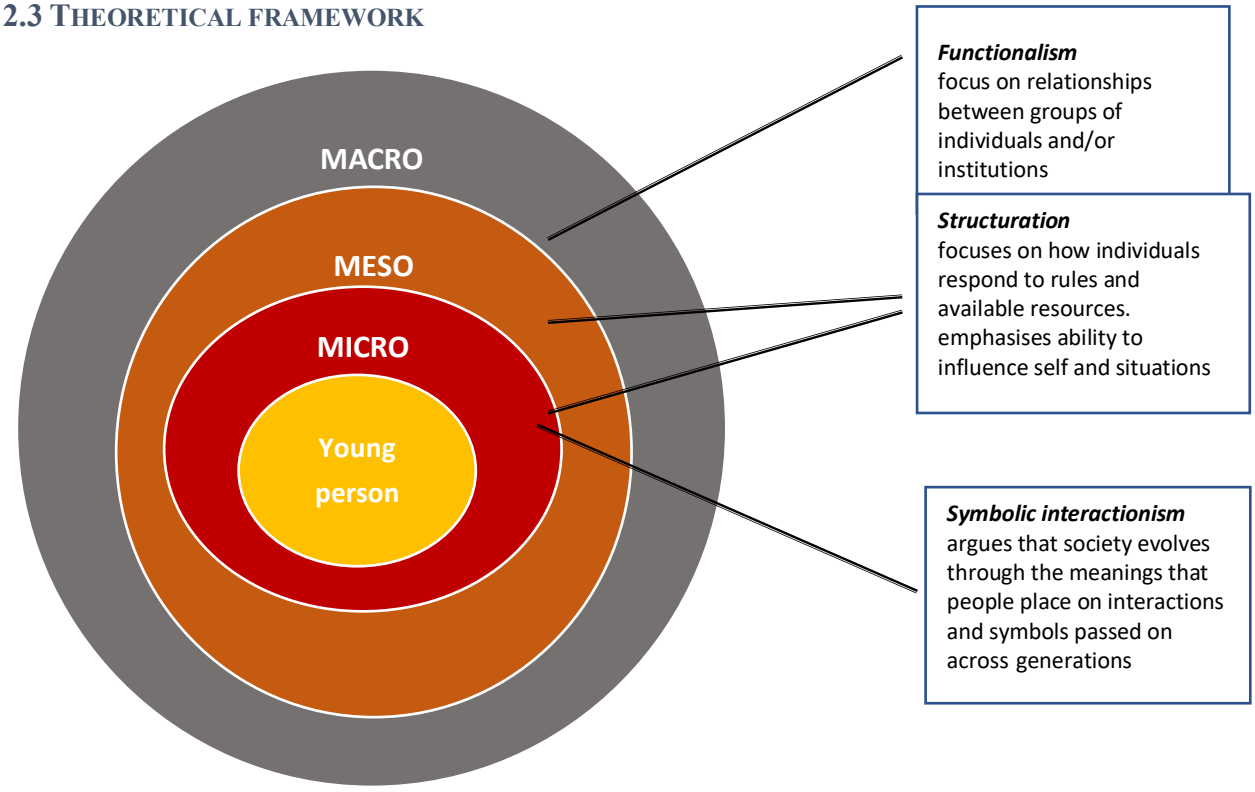
Scholars like Anthony Giddens critiqued structural functionalism arguing that individuals were not passive parts within a system but rather were actively shaping society. His Theory of Structuration places human agency as central to the evolution of society and its structures (Giddens, 1984; Loyal, 2003). He sees humans as not only knowledgeable but also active agents in society who are able to influence situations. Modern social theory criticises the lack of nuance in Structuration Theory (Phipps, 2001), however. Its two-dimensional structure is viewed as limited for understanding the differences that can be influenced by gender, race or sexuality in individuals' lives. In this study, this nuance is addressed through symbolic interactionism.

Herbert Blumer (1969) also saw the individual as playing a more significant part in the social order than structural functionalism proposed. His social theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism emphasised individual agency, subjective experience, and interpersonal interactions. He argued that social order was achieved through the meanings people assigned to their interactions with each other, with objects and events in their environments. These meanings could then be passed on as symbols e.g. language across generations (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz et al., 2019; Musolf, 2009). According to Blumer (1969) "the

meaning of anything and everything must be formed, learned and transmitted through...a process that is necessarily a social process" (Blumer, 1969 p.12). Symbolic interactionism also emphasises the importance of emotions in driving social behaviour. Our need as human beings for attachment or to feel like we belong drives our decision-making, as do our emotions such as anger, empathy, love, or grief. This view allows the social cohesion scholar to examine the assertation that a human being does not just respond or react to circumstances because of the actions of others but they interpret and then respond. It is this interpretation that gives the researcher insight into the lived experience of young people.

Figure 2.1 demonstrates how these theories provide a theoretical framework for this study. This framework allows the study to examine the self in society. Interactions are considered from the micro -level interactions to the macro level interactions and implications. The thesis goes on to explain how these three theories cover the micro, meso and macro level interactions for adolescents in this study.

FIGURE 2.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



2.5.1 The Macro, Meso and Micro

For a thesis that seeks to investigate adolescent perspectives on social cohesion, a theoretical framework that encompasses the micro, meso and macro lenses offered an opportunity to examine the social cohesion domains holistically. This micro, meso, macro approach is seen in other literature such as the Bioecological systems theory ((Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; James, 2005; Kilanowski, 2017; Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Tudge et al., 2016). First proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the study of children's psychological development, the theory has been used across other disciplines as a framework to build a comprehensive understanding of an individual's life and the influences upon it. The theory advocates for research that addresses the self in context, by acknowledging the institutions through which young people relate to the world; school, family, church etc. Social cohesion concepts such as Belonging, Social Justice, Acceptance/Rejection, Worth and Participation can vary in different contexts. In the Scanlon study, this was shown in the disparity of answers from participants on having a sense of belonging in Australia versus belonging in my neighbourhood. Because this study with adolescents was exploratory, the experiences and perspectives of participants provide an understanding of how a young person is situated in society, and how social cohesion can be supported.

At a macro- level, a functionalist approach acknowledges the role that institutions have in shaping, implementing and promoting norms and practices that impact young people's social cohesion. Section 2.3, discussed the role that five key institutions have in social cohesion through maintaining societal stability (Beauvais &Jenson, 2002). In the Scanlon Index's, Participation domain, people's participation demonstrates how civic engagement in political parties and voting maintains democratic institutions by providing legitimacy to political processes. The 2024 Scanlon Survey showed higher trust in Australia's education systems

than in government (National, State and local) and in religious or media organisations (Scanlon Foundation, 2024). Within this thesis's exploratory approach, understanding was sought on how young people perceived their interactions with various macro- level institutions. Conducting this study in community with a group of marginalised young people allowed for unique perspectives to emerge.

At the Meso level, Structuration advances the role of human agency to influence society. The study examined how, if it all agency is demonstrated in adolescents living in a low socio-economic environment. Here, a PAR approach allowed for participants to be coresearchers, bringing their lived knowledge and participating through methodologies that acknowledged young people's expertise in their own lives. In the introduction, police stop and search target were discussed and adolescents in the study had observations to share about their interaction with police.

At micro-level, the research considers how social cohesion is experienced and seeks to discover ways in which social cohesion can be supported at this level. Young people share rituals and symbols that signal belonging and exclusion. Their day to day interactions can also impact how they see themselves. The micro level also provides insight into young people's agency and their role in shaping the social structures around them.

This three-pronged theoretical framing is critical for an exploratory study on adolescent social cohesion that seeks to capture nuances and differences in how social cohesion is experienced by young people.

TABLE 2.4 SUMMARY OF MICRO, MESO, MACRO

Theory	Analysis level	How it links to social cohesion
Functionalism	Macro	Looks at the importance of social cohesion at societal level, framing social cohesion for the common good. Considers the role of institutions as instrumental to shaping social cohesion and considers young people's interaction with the institutions.
Structuration	Meso	Considers how young people in the study co-create social norms. Observes the role of human agency in bridging societal structures.
Symbolic Interactionism	Micro	Considers how social cohesion is experienced and interpreted and adds emotional depth to the study. Observes meaning making in interpersonal relationships.

The theories represent the individual in a society which has structures that can propel or hold back individuals, acknowledges individuals as actors in an evolving society with the ability to, over time, change societal structures, and also the influence of individuals on each other at more personal levels.

In the next chapter, the methodological approach of the study is presented.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

Research into social cohesion is necessarily multifaceted, as it needs to be examined via both subjective and objective measures. Investigations into social cohesion have also used both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine it at individual, community, and institutional levels (Acket S, 2011, Fonseca et al., 2019). In this thesis an interpretivist/constructivist approach is used to explore young people‘s ways of knowing that have formed from their social interactions, and how they use these to interpret their world (Neuman, 2003).

The chapter begins with a revisit of the research aims and research questions and explains the value of PAR as an approach for this cohort of research participants. In particular, section 3.3.1 considers the power dynamics inherent in adult led research and here different types of participation in literature are presented and examined. Section 3.4 then explains how the research methods used in the study address the power dynamics and the role of the research participants as co-researchers. Participants chose how they wanted to engage; and with which methods. Following an outline of the implementation and analysis, a critical reflection on the research is provided.

3.1 Aims and Objectives

As outlined in the introduction, the research aims of this study are to:

- Understand social cohesion as it is perceived by young people.
- Through PAR, explore how adolescent perspectives inform current social cohesion frameworks
- To present findings to service providers and policy makers.

3.2 Research Questions

Chapter 2's literature review highlighted gaps in understanding social cohesion from young people's perspectives. To address these gaps, this research will explore the following questions:

1. What existing domains of social cohesion measurement are relevant to adolescent youth?
2. By using a PAR approach that enables adolescents to speak for themselves in their own terms what (if any) new domains emerge?
3. How might current social cohesion models be better tailored for adolescent youth?

Chapter 2, discussed some of the indices that have been used to measure social cohesion in the past. Some use a dedicated survey instrument (Chan et al., 2006; Markus & Druzenko, 2007) and others draw on survey data from various instruments (Acket S, 2011, January 20-21). As it is as yet an evolving concept, a participatory approach was taken to allow for an exploration of the concept from an adolescent perspective. Researchers like Johns (2014) have also adopted this approach.

In exploring an adolescent framework for social cohesion, there was opportunity to identify nuances to adolescent social cohesion that arise from the institutions through which young people relate to the world such as family groups, community organisations, and schools.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 More Than 'Having a Say' - Young People's Participation

For the purposes of this research, adolescence is defined as those aged between 13 and 17. Results from this research and subsequent tools developed as part of this research will capture

data from this age group that, so far, has not been included in the Scanlon Social Cohesion research, whose participants are 18 years and older.

Since the ratification of UN Convention for Children's Rights (CRC), researchers still agree that children's participation is important and is not being afforded enough opportunity in research (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Culture plays an important role in how young people are viewed in research. In most cultures, children are not considered to be on equal footing to adults, meaning their opinions may sometimes be voiced but not always listened to. They are seen as undeveloped adults and therefore lacking the capacity to make informed decisions (Alderson, 2008). This positioning of children affects how they approach their relationship with an adult researcher and their willingness to engage in the research process.

The UN Convention for Children's Rights (CRC), which Australia ratified in 1990, supports the participation of children in matters that affect them. Alderson (2008) encourages researchers to remember that Article 12 of the UNCRC is about "all matters" (Alderson, 2008 p.87) that affect a child and that children's involvement must not just focus on their right to express their opinions. Alderson (2008) also reiterates the need for young people to not just participate but to decide in much the same way that adults have a right to make decisions about their personal life. In an earlier work which will be discussed later in this chapter, (Alderson & Montgomery, 1996) discuss the four levels where children participate in decision making.

According to the UN CRC, a child is an individual aged 0–18 years. The UN now also formally defines adolescence as ranging between 10 and 19 years of age. The World Health Organization goes further by defining 'adolescents' as individuals in the 10-19 years age

group and 'youth' as the 15–24-year age group, while 'young people' are defined as 10-24 years. The Australian Department of Health recognises three stages in adolescence ranging from;

1. Early adolescence - 10-13 years
2. Traditional or mid-adolescence - 14-18 years
3. Late adolescence/Youth - 19-23 years.

There are ethical complexities in conducting adolescent research because they have not reached the age of consent, which is 18 in Australia. Their views are often not captured in research and they, therefore, may not benefit from research as much as other population groups. The policies related to adolescents and young people can be inadequately or even ill-informed. The PAR approach used in this study addresses these ethical challenges by empowering young people to be authors of their own futures and to speak with authority as co-researchers on issues that concern them. PAR provides the opportunities for young people's perspectives and proposals to 'be received by the gatekeepers of professional knowledge' (Teram et al., 2005, p. 1134) through working with a researcher who grounds their experiences in theoretical knowledge.

Participation is a broad term and can encompass many scenarios, from being present during a discussion to being the final decision maker (Franklin & Sloper, 2006). As well as supporting better decisions through centering young people's lived experience, youth participation positively impacts young people (Checkoway, 2011). The Ladder of Children's Participation (Hart, 1992) outlines eight rungs representing different levels at which young people are included and participate in activities that impact their lives. Hart's ladder was an adaptation of Arnstein's ladder of participation and is designed specifically for children (Franklin & Sloper, 2006). The first three rungs on Hart's ladder, Manipulation, Decoration and Tokenism

are classified as non-participation. These are followed by rungs 4 to 8 representing increasing children's participation all the way to children participating as equals to the adult researcher. Hart (2008) encourages the use of the ladder as a reflective tool for researchers and practitioners as they engage with children.

Beyond children's participation, other tools are used to in contemporary community engagement, like the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Participation Spectrum that is used to decide the level of participation for the community (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). It is widely recognised and used in public consultations in policy development, urban planning and public administration among others. The spectrum is demonstrated in Figure 3.1 below.

FIGURE 3.1 IAP2 PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM.

INCRESASING IMPACT OF DECISION

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities' and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/ or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that the public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly in reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Source: International Association for Public Participation – IAP2 International

The objectives of the 5 levels are;

1) Inform: Here the aim is to ensure stakeholders have the right information. There is no requirement to provide a feedback mechanism or two-way communication however transparency is important. Media releases, announcements, newsletters are usually used to inform the public.
2) Consult: the public in invited to provide feedback and this can be through meetings, surveys or discussion papers. While public input is encouraged, the organisation remains the decision maker.
3) Involve: greater interaction is encouraged with more consideration given to stakeholder concerns and aspirations. It goes a step further than the consult level. Stakeholders are invited onto advisory committees or more in-depth workshops.
4) Collaborate: Here stakeholders have direct influence on the decision making. Co-design approaches fall into this level.
5) Empower: decision making power rests with the public.

As the public becomes more involved in decision making, other challenges emerge like time constraints and resource constraints. Participation in the higher levels Involve, Collaborate and Empower require a commitment to providing the resources and allowing time for the participation objectives to be met. There also needs to be a commitment to addressing power dynamics inherent in all human interaction and more so when government institutions are involved.

Other academics like Alderson and Montgomery (1996) propose four levels of participation, with each level preceding the other. These are: (1) Being informed; (2) Expressing a view; (3)

Influencing a decision; and (4) Being the main decider (cited in Franklin & Sloper, 2006, p. 15). The models discussed all have a spectrum of participation with increasing decision-making being given to the community. What scholars agree on is that effective participation for young people requires active *decision making*.

Discussing the approaches to participation is important for this research as participation can come in different forms, and within PAR decisions on participation occur at many levels (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Six choice points in PAR are discussed by Vaughn & Jacquez (2020), 1) Partner, 2) Design, 3) Collect, 4) Analyse, 5) Disseminate, and 6) Act.

They assert that there can be differing degrees of participation for each choice point within a research project, from research design through to how the research is disseminated. The first choice point is in partnering for the research and involves building relationships. For this research, relationships were pre-existing, with the academic researcher working at Learning Ground and co-researchers participating in Learning Ground programs. The Learning Ground Program itself was founded from participatory research, so the ethos was well established in the organisation and supported by the Board of Directors. The next three choice points are discussed in the sections on PAR, research methods and data analysis in this chapter. The other choice points are discussed in the results and discussion chapters.
A summary table is presented after the methods section to demonstrate levels of participation for the first four choice points.

3.3.2 Participatory Action Research

A PAR methodology allows for deeper insights in research and the development of effective policy solutions (Johns, 2014b; Macnamara, 2016). PAR was used to develop a framework to

explore the elements of adolescent social cohesion because it directly engaged young people in contributing to understanding social cohesion as it affects them. A PAR approach was developed in this study to address Research Questions 1 and 2, with the specific methods used being tailored to the age and social demographic of participants. This is consistent with the use of PAR in other related research, with PAR becoming integrated into policy-focused research to address the absence of a youth voice in decisions which are about or impact young people (Johns, 2014a, 2014b).

Using a qualitative approach allows an exploration of the nature of social cohesion for adolescents and how it affects them. The research sought to "create a body of relevant observations" (Blumer, 1969, p.51.) that provides insight into how the young people in this study interpret their world. PAR allows descriptive accounts and collective discussions that provide clarity for the researcher who is not an adolescent or a resident in Mt Druitt. In PAR, the researcher takes a less prominent role, allowing individuals to express themselves in their own way. Participants become co-researchers and their input goes beyond provision of data and more towards influencing the delivery and nature of the research, providing input into the analysis, and facilitating continued use of the findings in the community. Participants generate knowledge which they can act on, that is grounded in their lived experience. My role as a co -researcher in this participatory process was to articulate and systemise, through links to academic theory and processes, the lived knowledge and actioned solutions of the participants (Teram et al., (2005).

PAR provides an additional benefit in which adolescents are empowered to be authors of their own futures and to speak with authority as co-researchers on issues that concern them. PAR also provides the opportunity for young people's perspectives and proposals to 'be

received by the gatekeepers of professional knowledge' (Teram et al., 2005, p. 1134) through working with the researcher to ground their experiences in theoretical knowledge.

Participatory Action Research …with Youth?

This study purposefully takes a PAR and not Youth Participatory Research (YPAR) approach. YPAR emerged from PAR with a similar goal of prioritising the experiences of research participants as co- researchers and removing the power hierarchies inherent in academic research (Rose et, al. 2024). However participatory research with a group of young people is not the same as YPAR. Unlike YPAR, this research did not have youth development as a core goal (Ozer, 2016; Anyon et al., 2018; Fine, 2018). Instead, the research took an exploratory approach to articulate social cohesion from an adolescent perspective. This focus on collective outcomes through an exploration of adolescent understanding and engagement with social cohesion domains did not necessitate a developmental agenda.

Effective YPAR includes a process that involves "training in and application of research and advocacy methods" (Anyon et al., 2018 p.865). While training was conducted on Photo Voice, there was no training on other research methods or in advocacy. The research had the advantage of being conducted in community. This allowed young people to be supported by Chain Reaction Foundation and neighbouring organisations to continue to advocate for themselves outside the research timelines. Following the findings from this research, future research may choose YPAR to extend this research to other geographies and with extended engagement time.

3.3.3 Research Participants

This research was conducted on the premises of the Chain Reaction Foundation's Mt Druitt Learning Ground in Western Sydney. The Mt Druitt Learning Ground is an award-winning Centre of Excellence, and offers its program particularly to those experiencing difficulties in school retention and is successfully offered to non-Indigenous, Indigenous and linguistically diverse communities. The program has been tried, tested and refined over 18 years with independent results-based evidence supporting it to be highly effective in promoting self-efficacy, behavioural change, stronger capacity to handle mental health issues and connection for young people. The participants for this research were young people aged 13-17 from Mt Druitt and surrounding suburbs in the western areas of Sydney and were part of Learning Ground's programs. Young people are referred to the Learning Ground by schools, parents, local police and child protection agencies. They are referred for various reasons including extended school absences, behaviour, interactions with police, changing circumstances at home, bullying or being bullied, or becoming increasingly withdrawn. The Learning Ground Program focuses on psycho-social learning and nurturing to support young people to make better choices for themselves.

Sample and recruitment

This study was conducted with 19 young people (ages 13-17) from Mt Druitt and surrounding suburbs in the western suburbs of Sydney, who are part of a Learning Ground Program. The sample size is consistent with the literature (Charmaz 2006), where qualitative researchers recommend 10 to 30 as the ideal sample size, and 19 as suitable for an exploratory sample. Purposive sampling was chosen given that this research is exploratory and that the sample, (adolescents 13-17 living in Mt Druitt and surrounding suburbs), is drawn from the limited numbers attending Learning Ground programs (Denscombe, 2014).

To conduct this research, Ethics approval was given in December 2022 UTS HREC ETH22-7200. A two-step invitation and consent process was undertaken. Firstly, a general invitation to participate in this research was given by the Learning Ground. This involved the Manager, Family Liaison, calling parents and asking them if they would be interested in hearing more about the project. Parents who agreed were contacted and the Participant Information Sheet was read to each parent opting for verbal consent. Young people's consent was sought face to face through a verbal consent script. Parental consent was sought first to avoid the young person being disappointed should a parent not agree.

The following section discusses the research methods used. The methods were discussed with participants during the consent process and throughout the project, participants chose which methods they wanted to engage in.

3.4 Research Methods

Social cohesion like other complex social phenomena benefits from techniques that enrich the data derived from interviews and discussion groups (Kado et al., 2023). The following section is on the methods used in the study. The justification for these methods as well as their suitability for PAR are discussed further in Section 3.4.1.

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted at the Learning Ground between March 2023 and June 2023. Eight follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted between May and September 2023. Nine discussion groups were held between April and October 2023. Discussion groups included:

- a community mapping exercise, where young people showed places in their community that supported their connection.

- elicitation exercise, where participants selected headlines and images from newspapers from Wednesday 3 May to Thursday 18 May 2023.
- a scenario, where participants discussed what they would do to support connection if they were the Minister for Young People, or the Young Australian of the Year.

Participants also engaged in PhotoVoice, some as individuals and others as part of a discussion group. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for de-identification and these are used in reporting direct quotation in the thesis. As the research took a participatory approach, methods were discussed with the participants beforehand, and participants had opportunities to engage with the methods with which they felt comfortable. Each of the methods and their justification for use in the thesis are discussed in the next section beginning with the semi-structured interviews.

3.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

In keeping with a PAR approach with participants engaged as co-researchers, there was need to recognise that an interview "is not an open everyday conversation between equal partners" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 6). This is particularly true considering the power dynamics already existing between adults and adolescents (Hart, 1992). Part of the interview was a discussion on different methods and allowing the participants to decide how they would engage. Fourteen semi-structured interviews focusing on the responses of the participants in conversation with the researcher were conducted. The semi-structured interviews were held at the Learning Ground between March 2023 and June 2023. Eight follow-up interviews were conducted between May and September 2023. Interviews ranged from 8 to 15 minutes each, as appropriate for young people in this setting. The first interviews explored the concept of connection and community and sought to answer Research Questions 1 and 2. Taking some

guidance from previous definitions (Chan & et al., 2006; Fonseca et al., 2019; Jenson, 2010) social cohesion was discussed using the word connection and was described as;

> That which enables a young person to participate or contribute in a meaningful way with others who share the space they inhabit (neighbourhood, community, country) and have a sense of belonging. It is that connection that enables us to build communities where people have and experience the same rights and opportunities in life no matter their gender, race, culture or how much money they have.

This term connection was chosen as it is one that the young people in this research are familiar with. Interview data was recorded, transcribed and analysed and the results discussed with participants. Interviews were conducted in an area that is away from, but in the same room as others. Both the participant and I (the researcher) were visible at all times with others in the common area.

3.4.2 Discussion Groups

Discussion groups were held with a range of two to six participants. The discussion groups were held at the Mt Druitt Learning Ground. A total of nine discussion groups were held between April and October 2023.

Techniques Used in Discussion Groups

Three main techniques were used for the discussion groups. The first was *Scene setting* (using scenarios), a technique that has been shown to be effective in research with adolescents (Tinson, 2009a). Scenarios were used to discuss how young people would address some of the issues raised in interviews, if they were the ones in a position to make decisions that affected their communities or society. Two scenarios were used. One was where young people were “the Minister for Young People”, but this was later changed to

"Young Australian of the Year" as the young people found it difficult to understand the role of a Minister.

Community mapping was used to identify the institutions that participants engaged with in their community, and to explore the domains of Social Justice and Worth. Community mapping has been found to be useful in situations where young people have common experiences (Veale, 2005). This is true for the participants in this research, who come from the same area and attended schools that are similar in socioeconomic background. Participants worked in groups or individually to create maps of their communities, which they then discussed.

Visual Elicitation was used also. Participants used a form of elicitation that allowed them to engage more fully as co-researchers than is possible through conversation alone thus enriching the data gathered in the research (Kado et al., 2023). In this form of visual elicitation, participants looked at newspapers published between Wednesday 3 May to Thursday 18 May 2023. They cut pictures and headlines that they wanted to discuss because it meant something to them and their understanding of connection/ social cohesion.

The first discussion group considered the five domains of social cohesion as outlined in the Scanlon Index for Social Cohesion and sought to answer question one of the thesis. Subsequent discussion groups built on the findings from the interviews and other discussion groups.

3.4.2 PhotoVoice

PhotoVoice is a participatory method allowing participants to capture data concerning how they perceive their own social location, sense of belonging, and safety using photographs. Its

use fits in well with PAR as the participants decide which data to gather according to their understanding and their personal experience with the research topic. The freedom provided by PhotoVoice to choose what they will photograph and therefore what will be captured and discussed in the data validated the participants role as co-researchers and is in line with PAR principles. The participants' experience and local knowledge are authenticated through this process. Furthermore, the process of using PhotoVoice and the level of participation by participants makes way for the critical analysis that leads to action and to new knowledge (Wang and Burris 1997).

Participants discussed with the researcher the process and protocols in PhotoVoice, including not including people's faces in the photos. Participants asked if they could walk with the researcher and discuss what could be included in the PhotoVoice. A walk around the block was organised with participants discussing what they were seeing, and if it had any significance or meaning relating to belonging and connection. Photos taken through the walk-through training were included as part of the data collection. Participants went on to conduct PhotoVoice in their own time as well as part of an excursion they requested. For the excursion, participants chose three areas they wanted to visit in the surrounding area that they felt were significant for their connection.

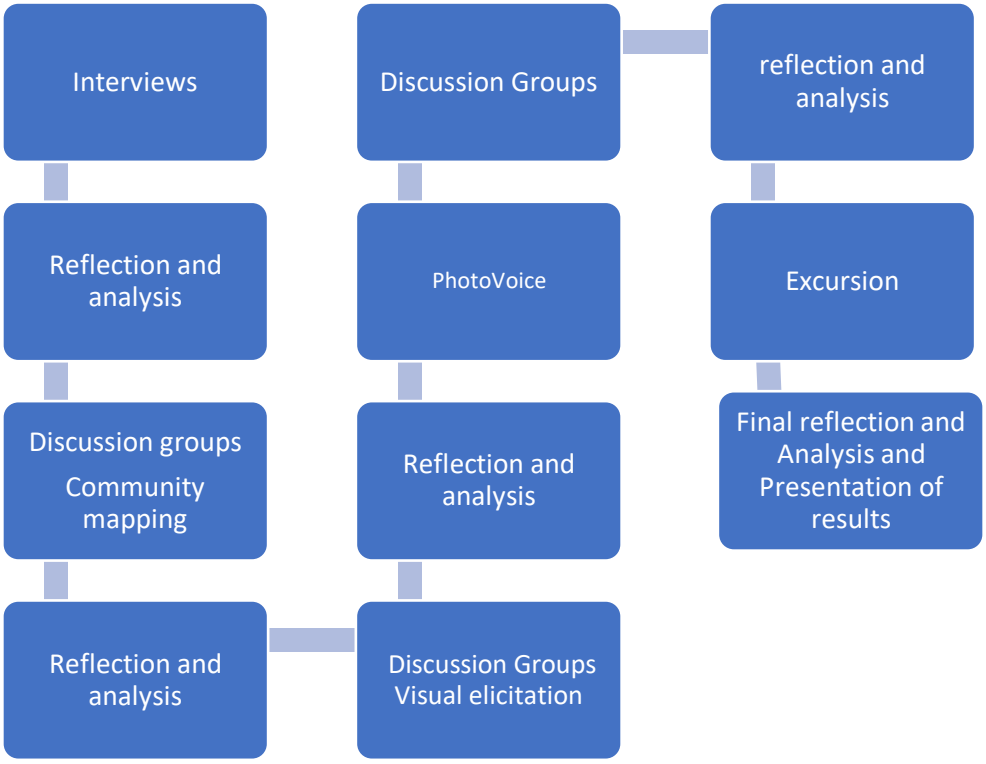
Conducting this research in Mt Druitt, with participants at the Learning Ground, some of whom have been identified as being at risk of disengaging from school, meant that there were some participants who could not engage well with reading and writing. Research methods such as journaling would have proved challenging for them. As an alternative PhotoVoice and other elicitation techniques using visual material are creative methods that permit young people to engage with the project in a non-threatening way. This enabled them to be more active in data gathering thus resulting in a more participatory process.

As a researcher, I used journaling and reflective practice post data collection to record my own thoughts and experiences during this research. Post interview journaling was written in a notebook and reflection typed as word documents.

3.5 Research Implementation

The sequence of research is illustrated in Figure 3.2

FIGURE 3.2 RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION



PAR provided the opportunity to revisit concepts and provided multiple opportunities to interact with participants creating an environment of rich learning and collaboration.

3.6 Data Analysis

PAR is acknowledged as developmentally appropriate and useful for adolescents, particularly when conducted in small groups (Ozer et al., 2010) which was true for this research. Like all research, data collected through PAR needs to be rigorously analysed (Bergold, 2012; McIntyre, 2008). This is addressed through systematic analysis as outlined in grounded theory and engaging participants in the analysis. This combination is advised by the work of Teram et al. (2005) who posit that PAR combined with grounded theory not only enhances the theoretical and practical contributions of the research but also ensures that it is relevant and useful for the participants' everyday lives. As the methodology in this research is not grounded theory, a comprehensive literature review was presented in Chapter 2. However, even in grounded theory researchers argue that some knowledge of the field is required to be effective (Charmaz, 2014; Timonen et al., 2018).

PAR' s cyclical approach was supported by grounded theory's understanding of meaning-making through interaction between researcher and participants and the researcher and the data. Interviews and discussion groups were recorded and recordings were transcribed and all scripts read for familiarisation. Participants were asked before recording and where they refused to be recorded, note taking was used. Data from the interviews was coded inductively and word clouds produced as part of the initial analysis. A grounded theory approach to the analysis meant inductive coding, to ensure the findings are grounded in the data (Glaser, 1993; McFeetors, 2016; Urquhart, 2013).

Codes were organised into subthemes and these initial subthemes were discussed with participants in discussion groups. While data analysis occurred in tandem with data collection, there were occasions where analysis did not occur between each of the discussion

groups and the data collection was prioritised (Corbin& Holt, 2011 as cited in Timonen et al. 2018). Clarification was sought from participants on emerging themes at the next opportunity. Though theoretical sampling did not occur, as subthemes formed, these were explored further with participants allowing the researcher to follow the data being generated (Timonen et al., 2018). For example, belonging was explored extensively after emerging as a subtheme from the interviews. The findings chapter will explain how young people were eager to differentiate their form of belonging from adult forms of belonging. I also referred to my researcher journaling and reflective notes as a way to think critically about all interactions during this research.

As premised in Section 3.3.1, each level of this research presented choice points in the level of participation for the participants. Table 3.1 below illustrates how the levels of participation supported a PAR approach in this research. Young people had opportunities to decide how they wanted to participate in the research and also in data gathering through PhotoVoice and visual elicitation. They also collaborated in the analysis, providing further insight and depth to the research.

TABLE 3.1 SUMMARY OF LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION FOR RESEARCH PROJECT

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Partner					
Design					
Collect					
Analyse					

3.7 Critical Reflection and Challenges in PAR

One of the challenges in conducting research including PAR is addressing the inherent power differentials between an academic or professional researcher and participants. In studying

young people in particular, power dynamics related to age, maturity, knowledge level, and sociocultural factors need to be considered and mitigated. The inherent power dynamics in how young people relate to older people are seen as a potential for bias to develop. The Mt Druitt Learning Ground's ethos of "each one teaches one" addresses this. This approach means that we all can learn something from each other. Participants and mentors at the Learning Ground learn that we all have something to bring and contribute from our own life experiences that can help the other. This recognition and underlying belief created a safe place. The environment brought ownership of the research process and output to the participants as co-researchers. Presenting the research findings to policy makers was one of main aims of this research in order to elevate the concerns of young people.

3.8 Ethical Considerations in Researching with Adolescents

While Thomas and O'Kane (1998) took the approach that they would assure complete confidentiality and address any disturbing confidences as they arose, I would agree with the majority of researchers that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed when conducting research with children. My experience as a practitioner has shown me that young people show readiness to disclose at different times and circumstances. I therefore addressed upfront with all participants that all information collected will be treated with confidentiality however, disclosures that show that the young person is at risk of significant harm will need to be reported and that I would always let them know if that was the case. This was an important conversation to have, given the circumstances that a majority of the young people attending the program exposed to in their lives outside the Learning Ground. The organisation where this research was conducted is a mandatory reporter and obligated to report risk of significant harm.

To conduct this research, ethics approval was sought and given by the UTS HREC. Permission was given to conduct it at the Mt Druitt Learning Ground. It was also important to consider the adolescent/adult relationship as it relates to other important adults in participant's life. This was highlighted more in the need for consent for them to participate in the research to be provided by the adolescent's parents or guardians. Participants also had to agree to participate. A distress protocol was developed in case of participants becoming distressed during an interview or discussion group, as some of the discussion covered issues of social justice and discrimination. No issues requiring reporting were disclosed during the data gathering.

Children are likely to defer to the adult in the relationship and the adult's knowledge rather than explore their own. Typically, the issues of autonomy and justice inform the ethical considerations in research (Chabot et al., 2012). PAR is considered one of the ways in which researchers can address ethical considerations in research with adolescents (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). This research gave agency to the young people in determining methods used in data collection and that are consistent with how adolescents experience the world. However, there is a tension within this participatory process as the adult researchers "operate in a governing role to ensure the validity of the work (as determined by the methodological frameworks endorsed by their respective research communities)" (Tinson, 2009, p. 171). PAR strives to place the adolescent on an equal footing with the adult. As a researcher, this dynamic was considered in every interaction. Hart (1992) also advocated for children to be engaged as early as possible to become active contributors to their communities.

Another challenge for this research project is that often solutions that are created by young people rarely influence policy changes because young people still lack power within the adult

world. In fact, social cohesion studies have been found to be lacking in capturing institutional voices (Fonseca et al., 2019) and young people relate to the world primarily through institutions. Presentation of findings to both policy makers and institutions is an important action out of the research and this approach allows for an actionable outcome that is useful for adolescents as well as the institutions working with them.

This chapter outlined the research approach, methodology and methods used. The challenges and opportunities in a participatory approach were discussed as well as the different levels of participation that can be utilised. The methods used and their positioning within a participatory approach for this cohort of participants was explained highlighting techniques used to enrich the data collected by participants as co-researchers.

The following chapter presents the findings of this thesis. Beginning with participant demographics and brief introductions for each participant, the chapter goes on to discuss the findings under four themes.

Chapter 4 Results and Findings

In this chapter, findings gained from data analysis of 14 initial interviews, nine discussion groups, PhotoVoice and eight follow-up interviews conducted with young participants from the Learning Ground between February 2023 and October 2023 are presented. The Learning Ground is a wellbeing and engagement centre for young people at risk of disengaging from school. Young people attend Learning Ground programs one day a week and are encouraged to attend school the other days. In total, 19 young people aged 13–17 participated in this research. As listed previously, the discussion groups included:

- a community mapping exercise, where young people showed places in their community that supported their connection.
- an elicitation exercise, where participants selected headlines and images from newspapers from Wednesday 3 May to Thursday 18 May 2023.
- a scenario, where participants discussed what they would do support connection if they were the Minister for Young People or the Young Australian of the Year.

Participants also engaged in PhotoVoice, as part of a discussion group "walk around the block" where they were learning how to conduct PhotoVoice and as individuals. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for de-identification and these are used in reporting direct quotations.

In the interviews, participants explored the concept of connection, young people's perception of connection, and whether they felt connected (to neighbourhood, community, country). The term social cohesion was explained to participants and in discussions, the term connection was used. This was defined and explained for this research as:

> That which enables a young person to participate or contribute in a meaningful way with others who share the space they inhabit (neighbourhood, community, country) and have a sense of belonging. It is that connection that enables us to build communities where people have and experience the same rights and

> opportunities in life no matter their gender, race, culture or how much money they have.

Participants explored this through the first round of interviews and these responses were also explored further in the discussion groups. The primary groups that young people felt they had connection with was their friends and their family.

4.1 Research Participants

As previously mentioned, the Learning Ground is a place for young people disengaged or at risk of disengaging from school for various reasons. Participants are referred to the Learning Ground through their school, agencies they are working with, local police and also parents self-referring through word of mouth. At the time of this research, participants had spent between 2 months and 2 years 2 months in Learning Ground programs.

The demographics of participants are outlined in the following section. Following the demographics, brief profiles are given of each participant and for the 14 who participated in the initial interviews, a short description of what connection means to them.

4.1.1 Demographics

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show that there was representation across all the 13- to 17-year-olds in the sample, but with more female than male participants. Two participants identified as non-binary. The majority of females were in the 13–14 age range.

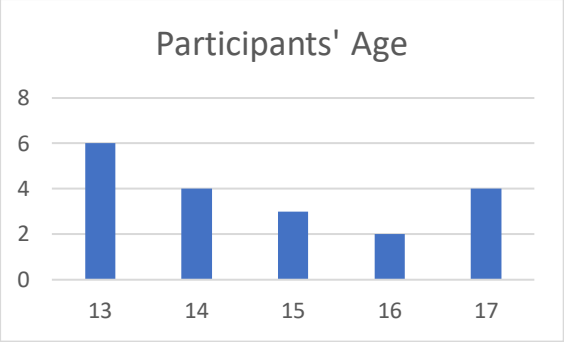


FIGURE 4.1 PARTICIPANTS' AGE

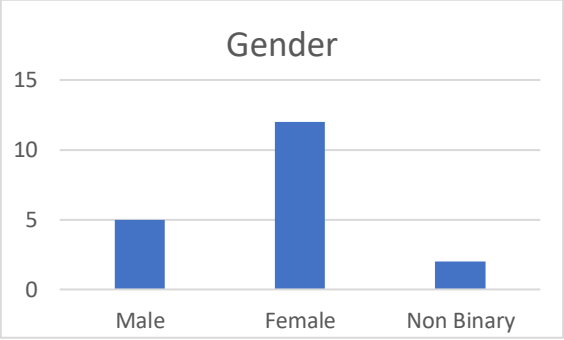


FIGURE 4.2 GENDER

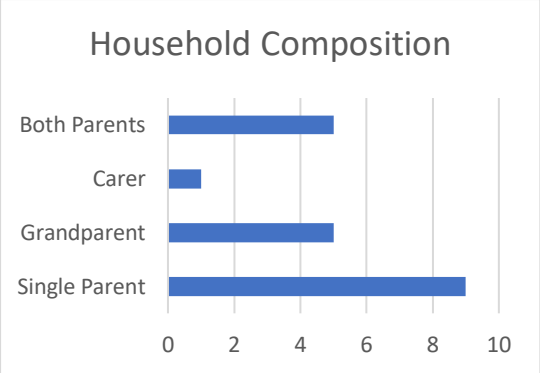
As part of the verbal consent process, participants discussed their ethnic background. Nine participants identified as Aboriginal. Among those who identified as Aboriginal, some strongly asserted a dual identity of being Aboriginal and Australian, while others were less assertive, having limited knowledge about Aboriginal culture. Kayla in the quotation below knows she has some Aboriginal ancestry but it is not something that her family has explored so she does not identify as Aboriginal.

> **Kayla:** "I know I am Aboriginal on my Mother's side, but I don't see her much, so I don't know much about it." *(interview)*

> **Melody:** "I am Aboriginal and I am Australian." *(interview)*

Participants of Caucasian background had differing knowledge of where their families first originated. European and Eastern European countries were mentioned. Others mentioned ethnic groups within their respective countries.

> **Karen:** "All I know is my dad's Viking and I have his blood."



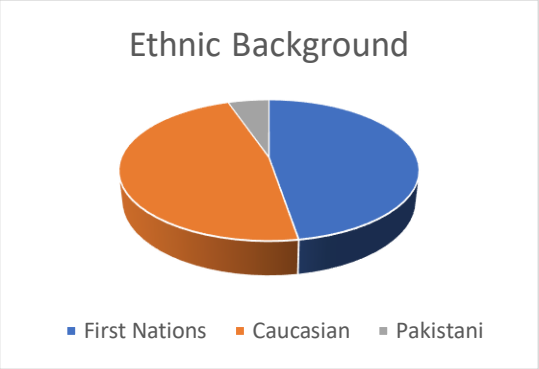


FIGURE 4.3 HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION **FIGURE 4.4 ETHNIC BACKGROUND**

Most participants live in single-parent homes. Five participants live with both parents and five with grandparents as primary carers. One participant lives with a carer who is not a family member.

TABLE 4.1 SUMMARISED PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHICS

	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	household
Karen	15	female	Caucasian	Single Parent
Claudia	14	female	Caucasian	Single Parent
Mark	15	male	Caucasian	Grandmother
Steph	14	non-binary	Pakistani	Both Parents
Melody	13	female	Aboriginal	Both Parents
Sasha	13	female	Aboriginal	Single Parent
Sarah	13	female	Caucasian	Grandmother
Joy	13	female	Aboriginal	Single Parent
Roy	13	male	Caucasian	Single Parent
Megan	14	female	Caucasian	Both Parents
Michelle	14	female	Caucasian	Grandmother
Cooper	17	male	Caucasian	Both Parents
Casey	17	female	Aboriginal	Both Parents
Mika	16	female	Aboriginal	Carer
Thera	17	non-binary	Aboriginal	Single Parent
Kayla	17	female	Caucasian	Single Parent
Angel	16	female	Caucasian	Grandmother
Brice	15	male	Aboriginal	Single Parent
Jerry	13	male	Aboriginal	Single Parent

4.1.2 Research Participant Profiles

Karen

Karen is one of four siblings living with her mom. She has had difficulty attending school on a regular basis and is at the Learning Ground to help her return to regular school attendance. For connection to be present, Karen says there has to be trust which takes time. She feels closest to her grandfather and her friend. Karen participated in the initial interview, discussion groups including the elicitation exercise.

Claudia

Claudia says to have connection, you need people that care for you and listen. She says the places she can go, where she thinks she is building connection, are school and some community places. She says young people need more opportunity to talk about the country and to learn about their futures, where they can get jobs. Claudia is a model student and a school leader respected by peers and school staff. She finds the school environment challenging and describes it as loud and noisy. Claudia participated in the initial interview, discussion groups including the elicitation exercise and in the PhotoVoice.

Mark

Mark speaks of connection relying on his actions as well as others. That his actions can help others feel like they belong. He does not think there is anywhere in his neighbourhood that helps him build connection. Mark's community is his school as well as his online gaming community. He described playing in teams online and enjoying the camaraderie and sportsmanship. He spoke of personalities online that engage in negative behaviour. Mark has struggled to remain in school. He lives with a grandparent. He participated in all aspects of this research.

Steph

Steph has been bullied at school. They attend the Learning Ground to support building their self-confidence. When asked about who/when and how they connect their response was "Uhm… definitely my family and my friends and just nature". Steph's community extended to relatives living overseas who they communicated with mostly via the phone and would also send each other parcels in the post. They state that to build a society where we have trust for each other requires a willingness to speak the truth and to allow people to speak freely about what they believe. They participated in all aspects of this research.

Melody

Melody attends a support class at school as she is autistic. Her connection is supported by the Learning Ground and another agency's program which provides a social group for her once a week. She has a sister and lives with both parents. While mentioning this is where her connection is supported, Melody also feels that she does not have a safe person with whom she can confide. Melody participated in the initial interview, discussion groups including the elicitation exercise, and in the PhotoVoice.

Sasha

Sasha lives at home with her mom and two siblings. She also has step siblings. She has connection with family and with her friends. She thinks for connection to be present, then individuals need to care for each other and to be friendly. Reciprocity would build trust between people and neighbours. Sasha participated in the initial interview and discussion groups including the elicitation exercise.

Sarah

Sarah values respect. She is under the care of a grandparent but spends most of her time in the home of one of her siblings. She sees respect as key to building connection along with honesty and loyalty. Sarah has had a lot of upheaval in her life and she feels her strongest link

to connection is through her sister. Sarah participated in the initial interview and discussion groups including the elicitation exercise.

Joy

Joy is from a large family. She thinks for young people to have connection, they need to be cared for. Building trust is important for Joy and she thinks that this can be achieved with more opportunities to meet people and learn more about them. She found the concept of Australia to be too broad, and it was hard to articulate what she liked/did not like or wished for in Australia. She was more comfortable contributing in the PhotoVoice and elicitation exercise, and did not speak much in discussion groups. Joy participated in the initial interview, discussion groups including the elicitation exercise and PhotoVoice.

Roy

Roy finds that school affords him the most opportunities to build connection with friends and with teachers. He values school as a safe space. His favourite subject at school is history. For Roy, giving attention and being given attention builds connection. He identifies his history teacher as a mentor to him. He participated in all aspects of this research.

Megan and Michelle

Megan and Michelle are good friends and wanted to be interviewed together. Megan says her family does not speak much about their history or where they are from. Her family lives in multiple households. Michelle lives with a grandparent. Both place a lot of value on friendships and their friendship groups are where they feel they belong the most. Both are highly disengaged from school and feel isolated in the school environment. Their behaviour has contributed to their disengagement, with multiple suspensions limiting school attendance. Megan participated in the initial interview, discussion groups including the elicitation exercise and PhotoVoice. Michelle participated in the initial interview, discussion groups including the elicitation exercise.

Mika

Mika is under the care of the State and lives with a foster carer. Her school attendance is irregular and she has moved schools a few times. In speaking of connection, Mika reflects on her thoughts of her mother who has since passed. She speaks of thinking for many years that her mother did not care for her. An uncle told her recently, when Mika attended a family funeral that before she passed away, her mother had fought very hard to have her returned to her. She feels that this knowledge has restored her feeling of belonging. Mika participated in the discussion groups including the elicitation exercise, PhotoVoice and follow-up interview.

Thera

Thera is non-binary. They are well connected with local groups and interested in learning more about their culture. They have struggled with school with school attendance because of bullying and anxiety. They identified that they stay connected with their school friends and overseas friends online. They participated in the discussion groups including the elicitation exercise, PhotoVoice and follow-up interview

Casey

Casey is attending school regularly and works part-time. Her connection is supported by her family and her friends. Casey is also enjoying school and looking forward to the future. Casey feels connected to her friends and has tension in her family that makes it difficult for her to feel a similar sense of connection at home. She participated in the discussion groups including the elicitation exercise, PhotoVoice and follow-up interview.

Angel

Angel lives with her paternal grandmother. She describes her background as Australian. She is Aboriginal on her mother's side although she does not know enough about the culture to identify as Aboriginal. Angel was under the care of the Minster and was placed in foster families three times before settling with her paternal grandmother. In the discussion groups,

Angel spoke of wanting to become a childcare teacher like her mother and her maternal grandmother. She felt her connection was greatly impacted by the fact that when she was removed from her mother, no one explained what was happening and why she could not stay with her mother. She says with each subsequent move, there was no explanation as to why she could not stay in each of the new homes. Angel lives with her paternal grandmother. Her father does not acknowledge her as his child. She says her father does not greet her or speak to her. At a community event at the end of the year, Angel divulged that she had enrolled in TAFE for a Cert IV in early childhood education and was working at a local childcare centre. She participated in the discussion groups including the elicitation exercise, PhotoVoice and follow-up interview

Cooper

Cooper has decided to not continue in school and has started an apprenticeship. Cooper did not feel a strong sense of connection to family and was reluctant for others to know where he lives. When prompted he said it was for safety and later revealed he was embarrassed by the state of his home. Cooper was one of the participants eager to "do something" and found just talking about it frustrating. He participated in the discussion groups including the elicitation exercise and PhotoVoice.

Kayla

Kayla was one of the strong advocates for lighting the park. She participated in the discussion groups and she, along with Casey, Angel and Cooper, also participated in the FUNPARK Leadership group that was leading the Light up Bidwill Reserve campaign. She participated in the discussion groups including the elicitation exercise, PhotoVoice and follow-up interview

Brice

Brice enjoys the friendship opportunities that school provides. Though he attends the Learning Ground because of being bullied and then becoming a bully himself, he still finds support from his friendship groups in the school setting. He also has good relationship with his teachers and feels very connected to family, including cousins. Brice is very active in the community and volunteers for community events and festivals. Brice participated in the initial interviews.

Jerry

Jerry is disengaged from school and is well connected in the community. As a result of his neurodiversity, he has struggled to find acceptance and his place in school. In May, Jerry volunteered at the Mt Druitt Reconciliation Walk where he helped with distributing brochures and also participated in the walk. He spent the whole day at the Learning Ground stall. Jerry says he volunteers to stay out of trouble. Jerry participated in the initial interviews.

This research included semi-structured interviews and discussion groups that allowed young people to engage with this research in a way they were comfortable with.

Table 4.2 showing participant engagement indicates how the participants engaged with this research.

TABLE 4.2 PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

	Interviews	Discussion Groups	Community Mapping	Photo Elicitation Exercise	PhotoVoice	Follow-up Interviews
Karen	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Claudia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mark	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Steph	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Melody	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sasha	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Sarah	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Joy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Roy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Megan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Michelle	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Cooper	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Casey		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mika		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Thera		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kayla		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Angel		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brice	✓					
Jerry	✓					

At the completion of the interview stage, participants were invited to participate in the discussion groups. Of the 19 Participants, 17 of them participated in discussion groups including participating in the community mapping and elicitation exercise. Thirteen participants conducted the PhotoVoice. The first discussion group was held on 19 April 2023 and the final discussion group on 3 October 2023.

Participants were placed into groups according to age and met at follows;

TABLE 4.3 DISCUSSION GROUPS

Discussion Group 1	
A (13-14yrs.)	Melody, Roy
B (13- 15 yrs.)	Sasha, Sarah, Joy, Mark, Steph
C (16- 17 yrs.)	Cooper, Casey, Mika, Thera, Kayla, Angel
Discussion Group 2	
A	Melody, Roy, Karen, Megan, Michelle, Steph
B	Sasha, Sarah, Joy, Claudia
C	Cooper, Casey, Mika, Thera, Kayla, Angel
Discussion Group 3	
A /B	Melody, Mark, Sasha, Sarah, Roy, Claudia
C	Casey, Mika, Thera, Kayla, Angel
Final Discussion Group	
A /B/C	Melody, Steph, Megan, Mark, Roy, Sasha, Sarah, Thera, Casey

4.2. Research Questions and Codebook for Thematic Analysis

The following research questions were explored in this research;

- What existing domains of social cohesion measurement are relevant to adolescent youth?
- By using a PAR approach that enables adolescents to speak for themselves in their own terms, what (if any) new domains emerge?
- How might current models be better tailored for adolescent youth?

Data was transcribed from recordings then read through for familiarisation. Following this, a grounded theory approach was used to analyse data. The data was coded inductively and emerging themes were identified progressively. Table 4.3 shows the subthemes developed and the codes that informed the decision on the themes.

TABLE 4.4 RESEARCH CODEBOOK

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Participant responses relating to:
Interpersonal Relationships	Belonging	Who participants are connected to, how they belong what belonging means to them	• Family connection • Family social and emotional support

			• Positive peer/friend relations • Rituals of connection/ traditions • Trust • Listening or being listened to • Positive online activities building connection and community
	Exclusion	Where participants felt excluded, or spoke of the exclusion of others	• Body image • Exclusion from family • Lack of friendships • Group conflict and exclusion
Learning and Skills	Social and emotional learning	How to make friends, safe relationships, understanding social relations	• Mental health • Present adults providing social and emotional support • Choice-agency-identity
	life skill learning	Things participants need to learn that they are not learning, fear about the future and their readiness for it	• Life skill learning • Future concerns • Hobbies • Things we don't learn in school
Understanding Cultural Diversity	Cultural diversity	A love of their culture, an expression that they wish to learn more about culture or that others would learn more about their culture. Observations and experience of racism	• Opportunities to practice or learn about culture • Prejudice • Pride in culture • Teaching about culture
	Neurodiversity	Neurodiversity in community and in school. support for learning, discrimination, future prospects for the neuro diverse	• Lack of understanding • The school environment and support
	Gender and sexual diversity	Participants discussing their sexuality and fears/prejudice because of it or how they have observed people interacting with sexually diverse individuals	• Participants experience at school and community • Safe places for young people to discuss who they are
Neighbourhood Dynamics	Structural Neighbourhood Dynamics	The look of the neighbourhood, state of homes, lack of infrastructure, delipidated public spaces	• Environment • Participation • Recreational places • Things to do with infrastructure described as unfair • Equity and affordability

	Relational Neighbourhood Dynamics	Adult anti-social behaviour, fights, gangs, perception of neighbourhood as less than, behaviour of police towards young people	• Crime and antisocial behaviour • Drugs, alcohol • Fights • Relationships with those in authority • Sharing of resources with neighbours • Young people and crime

4.3 Results by Themes

This section presents the overall themes and subthemes identified. Participant artefacts from PhotoVoice, community mapping and the elicitation exercise are also presented. Participants were invited to a final discussion on 3 October, 2023 where the overall themes were discussed. In this chapter, the focus will be on presenting the themes that emerged from the data. How these themes answer the research questions is addressed in Chapter 5.

In keeping with a participatory approach, subthemes of belonging and exclusion were identified in the interviews and explored further with participants in the discussion groups. As the analysis was ongoing throughout the project, participants were able to provide comment on the analysis and had opportunities to explore themes further.

The following themes and subthemes were identified from the data as outlined in the Table 4.3 Research Codebook:

Theme 1: Interpersonal relationships

- Belonging (subtheme1)
- Exclusion (subtheme 2)

Theme 2: Learning and Skills.

- Social Learning (subtheme 3)
- Life Learning (subtheme 4)

Theme 3: Understanding diversity

- Cultural diversity (subtheme 5)
- Neurodiversity (subtheme 6)
- Gender and sexuality (subtheme 7)

Theme 4: Neighbourhood dynamics

- Structural neighbourhood dynamics (subtheme 8)
- Relational neighbourhood dynamics (subtheme 9).

As will be discussed in the next chapter in response to the research questions, some of these themes and subthemes are identifiable in existing literature, some have an additional nuance introduced by the adolescent perspective, and others add to current literature on social cohesion.

The next section provides a broad overview of the overarching themes and lists the subthemes that are encompassed under each theme. Data from interviews, discussion groups is presented and supported with data from the elicitation exercise, PhotoVoice and community mapping. Images from the elicitation exercise and PhotoVoice are presented in relevant sections and discussed. In some themes, data from the elicitation exercise that relates to a particular theme or subtheme are presented in the form of a poster.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Interpersonal Relationships

The first theme identified from the data was that of interpersonal relationships and their role in shaping a young person's sense of connection and belonging. Two primary relationships of family and friendships were identified.

Family relationships discussed included extended families (aunts, uncles, cousins). As shown in the demographics in Figure 4.3 Household Composition, participant family units were

diverse and often unconventional. However, the family unit, in whatever form it took, was still a primary source of relational support. This finding is consistent with theoretical models of human development. Some participants were able to identify members of their families as a confidant. Family members included grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters and parents.

> **Claudia:** "In the family, there is always that one family member that you can trust with your secrets and stuff." *(interview)*
>
> **Mark:** "Normally I spoke to my nan about stuff like that (things that concern me)." *(interview)*

The second primary relationship was that of friendships. Participants stated that their connection with friends was reinforced by feelings of being supported, being listened to, assurance of confidentiality, and being respected. The reciprocal nature of these friendship dynamics demonstrates a form of social capital where participants felt they could rely on their friends. Trust was mentioned multiple times and participants discussed the actions that build trust, such as dependability and perceived similarities.

> **Michelle: "**I have a friend group … it's like a group of my friends there's nobody else really just me and my friends and I feel connected to them because we are all alike and they understand me and they like listen to me." *(interview)*

Within these two primary relationships, two subthemes were identified: Belonging and Exclusion.

Belonging (subtheme 1)

The identification of this subtheme is in keeping with Bronfenbrenner's (1998) assertion of the family as key to the development and nurturing young people. Young people's connection was facilitated through rituals such as open communication, spending time together and having fun together. Family connection was also associated with emotional support and a feeling of being understood.

> **Sasha:** "I get to play with my cousins." *(interview)*
>
> **Kayla:** "My mom and nan are an inspiration to me… I am lucky they are around to help me." *(discussion group)*
>
> **Sarah:** "Like my sister cause like she's like trustworthy and she like understands you a lot and like if you have a problem she will understand you." *(interview)*

The demographic data indicated that the majority of participants were not in family units with both parents. However, positive family relationships, even in extended form like grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, were still seen as a source of connection, identification and attachment.

Family

The majority of participants said that families were their main source of connection, with family members such as parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles noted as people who they feel they are close to and can trust.

Family played an important role in teaching young people how to have connection. This was expressed where participants felt they had good relationships with their families.

> **Melody:** "I feel like I was able to grow up in a nice household and my family taught me that it is important to have connection and they taught me about connection." *(interview)*

Participants also noted the importance of family traditions and celebrating together.

> **Steph:** "cause it's important to learn about family and support family and be with family and celebrate stuff with your family." *(interview)*

Friends and Peers

Participants agreed that belonging to friendship groups was important to them. There was recognition that the term "belonging" was understood differently by young people when

compared to the broader social cohesion literature (Markus, 2021; Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008), as belonging was closely aligned with fitting in. This sense of belonging went beyond the friendship group and was also sought in the wider school environment. Having friends was not enough; ingroup/outgroup dynamics manifest in a yearning for wider acceptance that was embodied in being accepted into the group of popular kids.

> **Melody:** "If I could add on to this, I'd say the more popular kids in school are the ones that everybody wants to belong to and it might not be the best example but everyone wants to be part of that group." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Roy: "**Yeah, it's true at my school, like the popular kids vape and that attracts a lot of people in my school and all my friends just trying to stay away from it." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Melody:** "I feel like the people in my school that really changed themselves a lot too so that they become popular so I feel like belonging kind of link to that like belonging is also being comfortable in your own skin...but what I think is to be comfortable in your own skin you have to accept yourself and who you are and in your own strength what you live by." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Michelle: "**I have a friend group … it's like group of my friends there's nobody else really just me and my friends and I feel connected to them because we are all alike and they understand me and they like listen to me." *(interview)*

High value was placed on how the young person perceived themselves as belonging to a group of friends. Those participants belonging to a friend group spoke of interdependence based on the need for support and understanding. Group cohesion (Braaten, 1991) among friends was demonstrated through expressions such as 'we are all alike' speaking to common ways of approaching life experiences. There was also safety to be found in a group of friends, where a young person could feel understood. In Roy's case, while he wanted to be in the popular group, he had a group of friends who could support each other to stay away from the negative influences of more popular peer groups.

TABLE 4.5. THEME 1: INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Theme One: Interpersonal relationships

Relationship type	Subthemes	Participant responses from interviews
Friendships	Belonging and connection	My friends even though we are all dumb but they listen and they understand.
		I like that there's kids in the street that you can play with.
		I get to hang out with some of the new friends I've made.
		I have connection with my friends and with my family.
		I wish we could be more equal and more respectful of each other.

Social media was used as a way to further develop relationships. This happened when friends introduced each other to other friends to expand their network through social media apps such as Snapchat. Sometimes participants would meet the new friends face to face but this was not seen as necessary as they felt they could communicate and be friends through the app.

> **Roy:** I have a group on Snapchat that are from different schools to me and we all just get together and we are friends *(interview)*

Gaming was also seen as a way to meet new people and develop friendships. The inherent dangers within social media were acknowledged with participants noting people's behaviour online created conflict that made online spaces unsafe.

> **Mark:** Yeah, maybe like umm people that swear or like are continuing being rude maybe they should like get banned off the game for a little bit or they could change how they act. *(interview)*

Another participant Jerry mentioned how devices helped to keep him company and not to be lonely. Since Jerry is disengaged from school, he relies on social media to keep in touch with friends he has not seen. He also acknowledges that people are able to misrepresent themselves online.

> **Jerry**: "You have to be really careful online as random people can say yes I am 13 too when they are not. When you are young you cannot tell apart who is older and who is lying. It's easier when you are older you learn to question that." *(interview)*

FIGURE 4.5 SOCIAL MEDIA

During the elicitation exercise, participants cut out pictures with phones and also with phone accessories and with a social media app. The words across the headline on the social media app “I can survive without a phone” created a debate where some participants said they could do without a phone while others stated they could never go anywhere without one.

Exclusion (subtheme 2)

Despite friendship being a source of connection and belonging, participants also expressed feelings of exclusion centred around friendship dynamics.

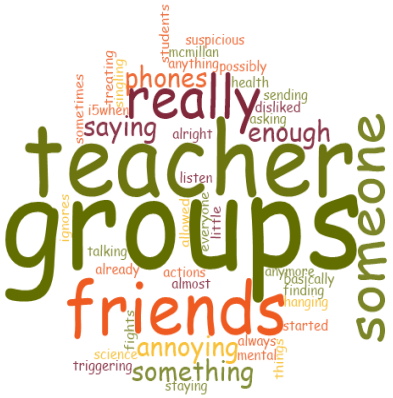
Under the theme of friendship, exclusionary behaviour was observed most in reference to the school environment. Within this environment, participants spoke of levels of belonging

determined by acceptance into a group of popular students. A selection of quotes relating to this is presented in Figure 4.5. Figure 4.6 presents a word cloud from NVivo for a code that referred to the school environment. The word cloud shows the word 'group' was the most used word and was used in reference to either friendship groups or groups of students who excluded others.

TABLE 4.6. THEME ONE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

Theme One: Interpersonal relationships		
Relationship type	**Subthemes**	**Participant responses from interviews**
Friendships	Exclusion	When I went to a school, I was friends with someone but then they started to hate me for some reason … I don't know and so like half of the school umm… disliked me now because she has been there longer and yeah I don't really have many friends at school anymore**.**
		But what I like don't really like about it which I'm kind of finding, I don't know, annoying or something, is that so many that went to the same school and they're all just hanging out with each other saying oh no one else can hang out with us and because almost everyone has a group of friends yeah, so people are staying in their little groups so, it's hard to make friends.
		I don't like when like people like just leave me out and stuff.

FIGURE 4.6 WORD CLOUD FRIENDSHIPS



Within group dynamics, social cohesion domains of Belonging and Acceptance/Rejection are impacted through disparate behavioural and moral norms. Exclusion was seen to come from the individual being different in a way that was not accepted by others. Sometimes this difference was a physical difference – e.g., not pretty enough or thin enough.

Participants expressed that there were things they felt pressured to do to belong to friendship groups such as vaping or jigging (attending school but skipping class). There was conflict in a participants' need to belong and group behavioural norms that were contrary to a participant's morality. Participants were aware of the dangers that existed in this need to be part of a group

> **Karen: "**If someone seeing that group they could think it's a cool group even if it could be like a bad trouble group but they don't know what they are getting themselves into." *(Discussion group)*

Older participants in discussion group 1B in conversation about the same topic again spoke of belonging with the popular group of kids.

> **Angel:** "Because if you get in with the kids that everyone wants to be or everyone wants to be friends with them. You think that if you are friends with them then you will be accepted. But if you are not, you think you are an outcast." *(Discussion group)*

The 16- and 17-year old's who are in Years 11 and 12 and have been in school longer were quite firm that patterns of exclusion were ingrained in the way that people interact at school, as evident in this conversation during a discussion group.

> **Kayla:** "No matter what you do no one is going to change it."
>
> **Angel:** "They have been excluding us since Year 7 until now. The it group think they own everyone and everything. They decide that they don't like you and they pick on you. Or they cause trouble and if you fight back, they threaten you. They play the victim." *(Discussion group)*

When family relations had broken down or a young person was in care (under the care of the State), there were greater feelings of isolation and exclusion. The lack of communication by adults in relationships when a young person is in care amplified their feelings of being rejected by the birth parent. The fracture of extended family contacts jeopardised opportunities for a young person to understand their situation and to connect meaningfully with the rest of the family. These findings show how a young person's perception of connectedness is influenced by family adult-adolescent relationships.

A selection of quotes pertaining to these feelings of exclusion in the family context are conveyed in Table 4.6 below.

TABLE 4.7 INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS-FAMILY

Theme One: Interpersonal relationships		
Themes	**Subthemes**	**Participant responses in interviews**
	Exclusion	My mother, I used to think that she did not care about me, that she just gave up, but I went to a funeral and one of my uncles told me that while she was alive, my mom tried very, very hard to get me back. That made me feel good
		My father left when I was eight and he now has another child. I see him sometimes but he does not talk to me

		anymore. Sometimes he even passes me in the street and does not acknowledge me. It's hard for me.

Demographically, the research sample contained young people who were mostly in single-parent homes and in the care of grandparents. When there was a strong adult-adolescent bond (with mom, sister, aunt, cousin, nan, pop), adolescents spoke of having connection with their families. When there was acrimonious separation, feelings of exclusion were higher. In the second quote in Table 4.6 above, the relationship between the birth parent and the young person has been severed in such a way that the young person's sense of exclusion is amplified each time they meet their father. Though the participant feels excluded from the relationship with their father, they draw strength from their grandmother who has taken the main caring role in the family-adolescent relationship. The family's role in creating a sense of safety and thus allowing young people to develop as confident individuals is supported by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Within families, exclusion was evident where there had been family breakdown.

As shown in this section, friendships and family were consistently mentioned as a source of belonging with belonging with friends linked to friendship groups. Exclusion emerged when young people felt they did not and could not belong within particular friendship groups. The findings demonstrate how young people define belonging at the micro and meso focus of their interaction with the world around them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2007; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). With participants who could identify a group of friends had the ability to belong, this belonging remained strong even when they were excluded by the popular group. Their sense of self and belonging was supported by them being able to be a part of a group and in a way form their own in group with similarities and norms that they could all belong to. Noting that the research participants are a demographic of students who would not

normally fit well into a school environment, it was interesting to observe their coping strategies and abilities to identify and belong to others like them. Even in these interactions, an "us and them" distinction emerges. Megan and Michelle spoke of their friendship groups being the only ones they could trust. Kayla and Angel also spoke of a particular group who had excluded them from kindergarten and used statements like "they will never accept us".

These findings are significant for a research exploring adolescent social cohesion where the reciprocal and cooperative relationships developed in community. In this case friendships garner trust (Larsen, 2014).

4.3.2 Theme 2: Learning and Skills

In identifying the importance of interpersonal relationships, the data also showed participants' frustration in wanting to make friends but not having the skills. Negative and exclusionary group behaviour had participants feeling ostracised. Few participants demonstrated an ability to see how their interactions with others impacted others' interactions with them. Rather they demonstrated an acceptance that they would go through school remaining socially excluded. Participants who were not in the popular groups also expressed a powerlessness and a reluctance to challenge how they were perceived. Being on the outside also affected their perception of themselves as someone intrinsically good enough. Affirmation and validation by friends were linked to their feelings of self-worth. Statements by young people alluded to a general need for social and emotional learning.

> **Roy:** "Just like showing emotions learning about other people and letting other people into what they've been through". *(Discussion group)*

Participants also sought learning outside the curriculum to gain broader life skills in preparation for the adult world. Participants named topics they thought they should be

learning about. These are topics where participants felt there was currently no avenue for them to learn. Under this theme, subthemes of Social Learning (subtheme 3) and Life Skills Learning (subtheme 4) were identified. These two subthemes are discussed in the next section.

Social Learning (subtheme 3)

Social and emotional awareness in the form of an ability to re-evaluate interactions and create a more positive self-image, or as one young person put it, "being comfortable in one's skin" was seen as a buffer to negative group pressures, demonstrating the types of social skills that were perceived to be needed to remain socially connected to friends and to avoid social exclusion.

NFPs and civil society organisations like the Learning Ground, Barnados and Fusion were identified as organisations that help with participants' social and emotional learning. These acted as a mediating space where young people could build social capital through social interaction with both peers and adults.

> **Megan:** "I feel like here, Learning Ground, – has helped me with my communication skills more than even my family has done." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Roy:** "Just here on Mondays we learn about a lot of different things it's helped - last year on Wednesdays it helped me a lot connecting with different people - looking at different community and understanding different communities." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Megan:** "It's that it's not just working on my social aspect I'm also learning a lot about other aspects like, here I'm learning a lot about Aboriginal language at Bernardo's which is another group I go to, I'm learning how to help people like me. And umm… at Fusion I'm learning how to be a really nice person and how to help others, build them up." *(Discussion group)*

Social and emotional learning was facilitated by the presence of a trusted adult. Someone young people felt they could talk to but also trust them to tell them the truth.

> **Sasha:** "Maybe like ah, maybe just trying to get their kids or if a teacher if a kid looks like they want to hang out with a gang that is trouble they can say' hey these kids look like they are nice but don't hang out with them." *(interview)*

This presence of a trusted adult was important to participants, in particular those who felt that they did not have someone in their family who they could speak to without consequences or judgement.

> **Jerry:** "I wish you could talk safely about how you feel, if you tell someone like at school, they call you emo and they laugh at you." *(interview)*

The word "emo" was used to describe an overly emotional, dramatic and attention-seeking response. The mockery made Jerry feel safe to disclose his feelings. Some participants also struggled to trust the teachers in school to be the safe person they could discuss their feelings with. The quotations below show this gap in young people's lives

> **Sarah:** "She like she is really rude and like if you're talking to her and like asking her for help or something she just like roll her eyes at you in like a rude way. Like if were going through a hard time at school and I am getting bullied or something like that. I want them to understand what's actually going on." *(Discussion group)*

> **Melody:** "I have no one really that I can vent to I feel properly. Without getting either in-trouble or dismissed." *(Discussion group)*

> **Melody:** "Sometimes when I go to someone that I thought would like listen they have never listened. They've just told me that, what I'm feeling is wrong that's not how I'm supposed to be feeling in that situation." *(Discussion group)*

The impact on adolescent mental health of these interactions is reflected in their feelings that there is no real understanding of what they are going through. Their feelings are minimised and dismissed. Participants also expressed a vulnerability to being mocked and a fear around the lack of confidentiality. Participants who were seeing a school counsellor said that they could go to them to discuss their feelings however the counsellors were not always available.

Like skills Learning (subtheme 4)

Education was observed to be an important consideration for holistic thinking about social cohesion. Education as it currently stands is seen as the pathway to success, freedom, and a better life. Participants demonstrated a value for school both as a place for education and supporting their social skills.

> **Roy:** "Knowing that I am safe there and like I know people won't hurt me in anyway because there are adults and people around me that support me." *(Interview)*

> **Melody:** "I like how there's a lot of support and how they can like change the algorithm to help you not just be really strict like you have to learn this and you have to be good at this." *(Interview)*

The algorithm that Melody speaks of is the ability for teachers to adjust the work to a level the student can engage with. This is important for Melody who is in a support class and requires additional assistance to complete the tasks set at school.

However, participants said there are topics they need to know more about but there is currently no structure to discuss these safely at school. Some of the learning on social and emotional learning was being met at the Learning Ground and other civic places. The role that civic places play to support young people's learning and social cohesion is discussed further in the section under neighbourhood dynamics.

However, there were topics that young people felt were not being addressed in their current settings. Here, it shows young people's dependency on institutions and the adult world for their development and understanding. Participants named the following education needs;

- How to get a job
- How to buy a house
- Living as an adult
- Sexual assault
- How to recognise you are in an unhealthy relationship

- How to access cheaper health care
- Mental health support
- Respect
- How to build trust
- How to make friends
- Drugs

Participants noted that they needed more extensive education that includes life skills. In discussing whether there were opportunities to talk about some of the topics they had raised at school, participants reported that they did not have places to learn what they felt they needed to learn.

> **Mika "**Not really, no. Not really. Okay. But they should they just talk about drugs and like Yeah. More education in schools about like other problems other than what they want us to know. Yeah. Okay. Like teach us things we need to know". *(Discussion group)*

Also, Thera when discussing sexual assault states:

> **Thera** "Okay. I think you brought on that one. Like, um, yeah, assault. Abuse or anything that, just anything. Just teach them that abuse isn't okay." *(Discussion group)*

Research participants are starting to think about the future and whether or not they will be happy there. The older participants reported being concerned about whether what they were learning was sufficient for them to be successful as adults in an unfamiliar adult world.

> **Kayla:** "No because half the teachers don't want to talk about it. They teach us what they think we should know. They talk to us about what they think we should know and not the things that matter to us. I feel like they don't give a damn." *(Discussion group)*

During the elicitation exercise, some of the images chosen by participants spoke of these concerns and worries about the future.

FIGURE 4.7 WORRIES ABOUT THE FUTURE

> **Kayla** "My auntie the one I told you about last week says she has never had to use maths or English or poetry, she has not used it in her life for anything outside of school and now outside school she has to learn everything by herself. She had to teach herself how to get her first house, how to make money without a job she was partially blind. Without a mother figure to help because her mother kicked her out at ten because she thought alcohol and drugs were more important than a child so she got rid of my auntie and mom and my nan took her in". *(Discussion group)*

This is learning participants say is currently beyond the school curriculum. Older participants said they felt unprepared for life after school and spoke of having no one at home who can advise them of the opportunities available. This lack of support is often generational where the adults in their lives did not have the support when they were younger. Kayla related the story of her aunt who once she started working did not have anyone to tell her about saving or how to rent or how to buy a house. Kayla appreciates that because her aunt is there, she has someone to ask. However, she does not count her mom and nan as people she could ask about how to get a job or how to buy a home. This demonstrates a lack of equity for young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods/families where there is no opportunity in the home to learn life skills. There is an expectation from participants that teachers and school should provide the learning that their parents or carers are not able to provide.

> **Roy:** "So like, talk to you about the country, show you places that you can get like jobs and that". *(Discussion group)*

School seemed the likely place for participants to receive this learning; however, these opportunities were not being made available in schools.

Participants also spoke of the need for different skills that recognise or align with their capabilities

FIGURE 4.8 SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

> **Melody:** "All kinds of skills, because we are different we have our strong suits so there are not many jobs that have just one skill I'd like to see people and also help people to have the different skills needs for jobs. Yes, because jobs are changing so much you don't need just one skill, you need many skills to do a job." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Thera: "**Yeah, when you can just get taught different stuff. Everyone's not on the same level." *(Discussion group)*

The majority of participants attending the Learning Ground are struggling academically as often their behaviour or anxiety has caused them to miss significant portions of their schooling. The need to have opportunities to develop specific skills for them to find employment later in life was important for participants.

Relationships, and how to manage relationships was another topic with participants feeling they need support to "force" themselves out of relationships. The choice of the words used by participants demonstrated that sometimes they may have an awareness that relationships are not safe but feel themselves unable to make the decision to stop the relationship. It is in these

places that they need an adult to help them navigate the harder choices, or teachers and educators to help them not only differentiate safe and unsafe relationships, but also to leave them.

This extended to relationships where there was sexual assault.

> **Kayla: "**And get teachers to understand more about it too. Because sometimes when that happens to people and they reach out to a teacher or an adult, they'll be like, oh, are you sure that's happened? Are you sure they didn't just fall over or things like that. Yeah, or did they put their penis inside of me." *(Discussion group)*

Being believed also extended to concerns about how they would be treated if they disclosed sexual assault. Participants expressed that teachers did not always believe or respond appropriately when young people reported sexual assault. In both Kayla's quote above and Thera's below, the teacher to whom the incident was reported responded in the same way. While not attending the same school, Thera and Kayla are connected in community and may have been discussing the same incident. Participants were comfortable discussing issues such as sexual assault together in this research, which showed that they had built trust in their relationship together and as groups. This was facilitated by their time together at the Learning Ground as well as the topics they had addressed as part of the project.

> **Thera:** "I had a friend when that happened to her. Yeah, she did school and she left. And um, she came back because she left something at school and she did, then she came back through an alleyway and it happened to her and she had stuff all in her pants and all the teacher said was, are you sure she didn't just fall over? And I feel like teachers need to be educated more on that stuff. Yeah. cause it's not just someone falling over because young kids get knocked up cause of all that stuff." *(Discussion group)*

Participants ability to identify gaps in their learning and also gaps in the services available for them to access the learning they need was shown in this section. Some participants were able to identify professions they would like to pursue such as working in a day care (Angel) youth work (Casey), working as a train driver (Thera), working with neurodivergent students (Melody), and Cooper who had already started his apprenticeship as a builder.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Understanding Diversity;

Understanding diversity was identified as a third theme in the analysis. Within this theme are three subthemes: diversity in Culture (subtheme 5), Sexuality (subtheme 6) and Neurodiversity (subtheme 7). This theme is named understanding diversity because while young people spoke of racism, discrimination and invisibility, including from adult stakeholders who should be protecting them from such experiences, they highlighted the need, for both young and older people, to have opportunities to learn about minority groups in a safe environment.

Racism was also raised in conversations about Australia and in police conduct. Participant interaction with police is discussed in detail in the section on neighbourhood dynamics (theme 4) as the interactions with police extended beyond racial prejudice.

Cultural Diversity (subtheme 5)

Australia was seen as a place that offers opportunity to learn about many cultures. This was seen as a positive aspect of Australian society. Conversations about different cultures also included a desire to keep learning about them. There is a positive curiosity about what different cultures have to offer Australia.

> **Melody:** "I like how there's like so many different cultures I get to learn about on like a daily basis." *(interview)*

The sharing of one's own culture was articulated by a participant who wished there were opportunities for others to learn about Australia's history and that the learning of this history should be offered to others visiting Australia, as Australia has more to offer than the usual tourist attractions.

There was acknowledgement that racism exists within Australian society and that people did not always treat each other with respect.

> **Roy:** "I've seen racism and, um, an Australian bullied an Indigenous man, because of his race and the Indigenous man said it was the Australians man's fault that, um, the stolen generation happened." *(Discussion group)*

> **Angel:** "Like I have seen not with anyone I know but you see people and hear people say stuff about Aboriginals like they are all druggies and all alcoholics which is terrible in this community there are so many people who are Aboriginal and that's not true for all of them not true at all." *(Discussion group)*

The young people in this study thought that this behaviour was exhibited by a few and that the majority of Australians were accepting of different races. Attitudes of racism were seen to come from a place of ignorance rather than an informed view.

> **Roy:** "Just like what has been said before, people in Australia accept different people but some people just do not think straight and they think that immigrants and refugees are bringing hate into Australia." *(Discussion group)*

The young participants had observed racism in school and had also experienced it. Racism was targeted towards immigrant groups as well as Aboriginal people. This racism took the form of racial slurs, avoidance and targeting.

> **Kayla: "**One of my friends in primary was Chinese and these other Australian White kids were picking on her saying go back to China you don't belong here. And that pissed me off." *(Discussion group)*

> **Jerry:** "I do not like that racist people get angry and target you if you are even a 10th of their colour. We are all humans; our colour should not matter. We are humans. We are the same. Same as animals." *(interview)*

Jerry identifies as First Nations and his colour is very pale. His statement speaks of lateral violence where he feels not accepted as a First Nations person. Experiences with and observations of racism impacted young people's perception of Australia as a place that is fair. This research did not look at how attitudes and perceptions of different cultures/races and religions formed, however the need to keep educating and discussing these topics was clear.

> **Steph:** "I think that Australia is, like [I] said before, but people make fun of people because of their background and the racism in the world with different people coming to Australia because of the war, the racism is not helping." *(Discussion group)*

Australia was also seen as a benevolent country that is open and welcoming to others by some, particularly those whose countries were at war. There was a sense of pride in this observation and accepting those who needed a new home was seen as a value intrinsic to Australian society. This sense was stronger among the younger participants 13 and 14 years old.

> **Megan:** "We would never block people from coming here. We don't block migrants like if someone is a refugee and they had to migrate because of war we would never not let that person in." *(Discussion group)*

Older participants did not entirely believe this view of Australia, with Mika, a participant with First Nations background declaring "I have no comment on that" when discussing the finding from the younger participants discussion group. Mika sat with arms crossed and made a huffing sound after this comment. She was not comfortable pursuing the topic in conversation with others however it was clear that she did not agree with this statement. As the sample did not include participants from refugee backgrounds, there may have been little understanding of issues of migration among the participants. Prejudice and racism however were topics that they were familiar with and could speak on.

Participants agreed that this was an important matter when addressing connection for young people. Prejudice was seen as coming from lack of knowledge rather than maliciousness and phrases used by participants included "some people just don't think straight".

FIGURE 4.9 UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

Figure 4.9 showcases the headlines and images participants selected from newspapers. The images support the subthemes under the theme on understanding diversity that emerged from participant interviews and discussion groups. The images show pride in culture as well as curiosity about other cultures.

> **Mika:** "I guess. Me, proud of my identity would be my culture. My background. Yeah. I'm proud to be Aboriginal because just something about the culture makes me proud and happy to come from the land." *(Discussion group)*

Participants also showed awareness of conversations around Black Lives Matter, with comments like "police shoot first and ask questions later".

FIGURE 4.10 YES VOTE

In Figure 4.10, the Yes vote and its debate is likened to the prejudice on sexuality. Participants drew a likeness with the targeting of minority groups in the conversations around the Voice referendum.

Participants prioritised creation of understanding among the different cultural groups in Australia. They saw the diversity of Australia as an opportunity to learn about others and for others to learn about their cultures. These findings are supported by findings from the 2024 Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion in Australia Report which demonstrated that younger adults (18-24) are generally more accepting of diversity.

Neurodiversity (subtheme 6)

Participants also spoke of the invisibility of those with neurodiversity. There was an acknowledgement that young people who are neurodivergent were not treated the same within the schools. They were more likely to be excluded and Melody, who is autistic, felt she did not always receive the support that she needed from the school. She reported feelings of isolation because of exclusion from friend groups at school. Exclusion for neurodivergent young people was also highlighted in a lack of access to the resources including the right education support.

> **Melody:** "There are no schools that are there for those with high special needs like my sister. She's going to two and can only go for two days to the special one as its very expensive and they have to pay for a lot of staff to keep the kids safe there." *(Discussion group)*

Melody's autism is not as severe as her sister's and she feels optimistic about her future. However, she feels that generally there are few options for neurodivergent young people. Melody lives with both parents in public housing and she shows an awareness of her sister's development being held back through not having enough money. She is also thinking about the need to have a job in future.

> **Melody:** "I feel that most people can get jobs especially in Australia if they really wanted to but I feel that the one person that I feel is overlooked many times is people with special needs like me. And I feel that we are being overlooked as brain dead when we are actually pretty capable." *(Discussion group)*

Melody and others like her having been subjected to bullying and exclusion at school because they are in a special needs class. She has received support from programs like the Learning Ground and social groups in other not for profits that give her confidence for her future. It is also in thinking about the future that Melody acknowledges that not everyone has access to the support that she does. Steph was looking for additional support at school and felt they were not receiving the support they needed. They would like to be in a support class and feel that their current class is not supporting them to stay in school and succeed.

> **Steph: "**The teachers have a hard time understanding that I, I'm not like other students and that I should not put into normal class because it's not for me and I will end up getting bad again." *(interview)*

Because of their risk of disengagement, the Learning Ground had already worked with Steph's parents and school but were only able to secure 2 days a week in the support class due to school resourcing challenges. Steph continued to struggle at school where they felt that their two days of support class would end and they would be back full time in the mainstream.

Melody hoped for access to training that offers different skill sets for those who are not able to engage fully in the school systems for future employability.

Adolescent perspectives supported the inclusion of other minority groups. These included the neurologically diverse groups we discussed above and the sexually diverse; discussed below.

Gender and Sexuality (subtheme 7)

The sample included two young people who identify as non-binary. Their observations of being targeted and discriminated against were supported by their peers in discussion groups. Young people observed that physical attributes such as a person identified by others as female cutting their hair short could result in bullying behaviour related to gender or sexual orientation. The same was discussed regarding choice of hair colour.

> **Sarah:** "This girl she had coloured hair and everyone's like eww look at her were like not hanging out with her cause she's got different coloured hair to all of us. Cause she dyed it like rainbow." *(interview)*

Discrimination was again more focused in the school yard. Other participants also commented on the lack of safe places to discuss sexuality in confidence.

> **Jerry "**I also wish there was a safe place to allow you to be you. Your own identity. If you cannot tell your parents your sexuality that there was someone you could talk to and they don't tell. Where you could have friends that are the same as you." *(interview)*

The participants spoke of the need to understand diversity while recognising that discriminatory behaviour is happening around them.

4.3.4 – Theme 4 Neighbourhood Dynamics

Within neighbourhood dynamics, two subthemes were identified: structural neighbourhood dynamics (subtheme 8) and relational neighbourhood dynamics (subtheme 9). This theme and its subthemes are linked closely to issues of social justice and equity. Participants highlighted how their neighbourhoods differed from others with comments on needing to go to different suburbs to access a nice park or a safe place to hang out with friends. Participants also reflected on the reputation of their neighbourhood with one participant saying;

> **Angel:"** Nothing good comes out of Bidwill." *(Discussion group)*

Along with the impact of infrastructure, including transport, participants also noted the role of adult behaviour in general, their neighbours, and civic organisations. Participant interactions with police were also noted under this theme in Relational Neighbourhood Dynamics.

Structural Neighbourhood Dynamics (subtheme 8)

Civic spaces provided through youth centres and NFP organisations were identified as safe spaces and attributed as warm, pro-social and emotionally supportive.

> **Sarah:** "Well I know one place that like Is near my sister's house like a community centre and like if you're like new there and stuff like there's like a whole bunch of activity's and stuff." *(interview)*

Within a safe space, young people feel that they are welcomed, that they are accepted. These feelings can be from their peers, however the primary source of generating these feelings was adults and how they interacted with young people. Identified adults included youth workers, teachers, social workers and family members. Safe spaces allowed for openness and reciprocity as well as learning in a non-threatening non-judgemental environment.

> **Karen:** "I like this place, Learning Ground, it feels like a big community." *(Discussion group)*

Schools were characterised as safe spaces when there was perceived support from teachers and school staff. Invalidation of young people's feelings by adults contributed to their sense of isolation and solidified a reluctance to ask for help. Safe spaces also allowed for responsible risk-taking with participants using their access to safe spaces (within not-for-profit and community organisations) to volunteer for community events or to support other young people as peer mentors.

> **Steph:** "Maybe like, have more youth, youth communities around school. So very close to school so you can go there when you are not feeling okay. Like maybe if there's something bad happening in school, you just go there." *(Discussion group)*

Thera spoke of the learning they had received as part of the White Lion Café. This café run by a not for profit organisation provides training in becoming a barista and hospitality and offers opportunities for young people to gain employment and workplace experience. Thera invited other participants to visit the coffee shop as part of the excursion.

FIGURE 4.11 - CIVIC SPACES – WHITE LION COFFEE

	**Thera: This Coffee shop taught me so much, how to be a barista, how to show up at work**

Through the community mapping exercise, participants highlighted areas in their community and what those places meant to them in building connection. Physical spaces were identified.

Young people spoke of the need to have safe places in their area so they could be together and develop friendships. The parks around the Mt Druitt LGA were seen as not safe because equipment at the park was dilapidated – e.g. 'there is a zipline there but it does not work'. Parks were also not regularly maintained and often had broken glass, needles and litter around. Participants were frustrated that people in the community were not taking care of the parks. The park in Bidwill is located behind houses and does not have lights. Participants spoke of needing to walk by the park on the way home, but in winter months the park is dark by 5.15 pm, making it very unsafe in the view of participants. Participants also spoke of unfenced parks where they cannot take their siblings.

FIGURE 4.12 NEIGHBOURHOOD PARKS

This image was taken of a local playground in which equipment is regularly defaced. Participants also included a photo of broken glass on the playground floor.

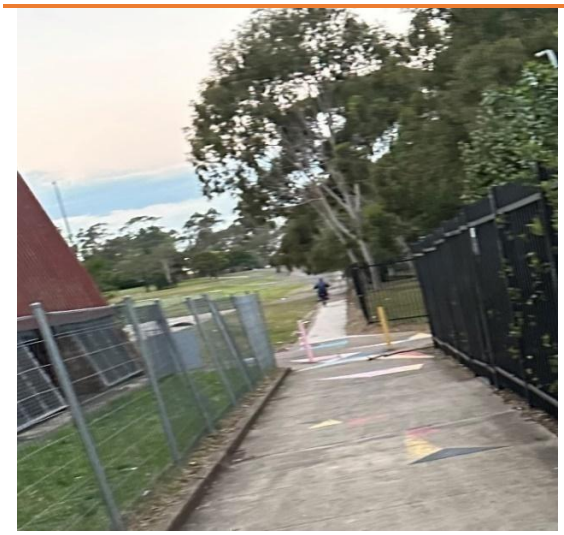


Image of a dirt bike rider speeding through a local park. This is a reported to be a common occurrence that participants say makes the park unsafe for others. Teenagers and young adults are usually on the dirt bikes.

Roy: "People vandalise, like children's play playgrounds? Where children go and they smashed glass and all that." *(Discussion group)*

Conversations about safe places led participants to actively seek to do something within their neighbourhoods. The notion of being able to create immediate change created a sense of empowerment. Participants were eager to do something that they felt was accessible and could be acted on quickly. During one conversation about safe places and the condition of local parks, one participant asked "when are we going to stop talking about it. Why don't we just go and clean the park". This demonstrated that the research space had created a safe space for participants to present their ideas and a confidence that together they could make a change. Other participants readily agreed that this was something that they could all do. Though participants were eager to clean up the park, the clean-up did not eventuate because of the risk to young people from some of the debris in the park (glass and needles).

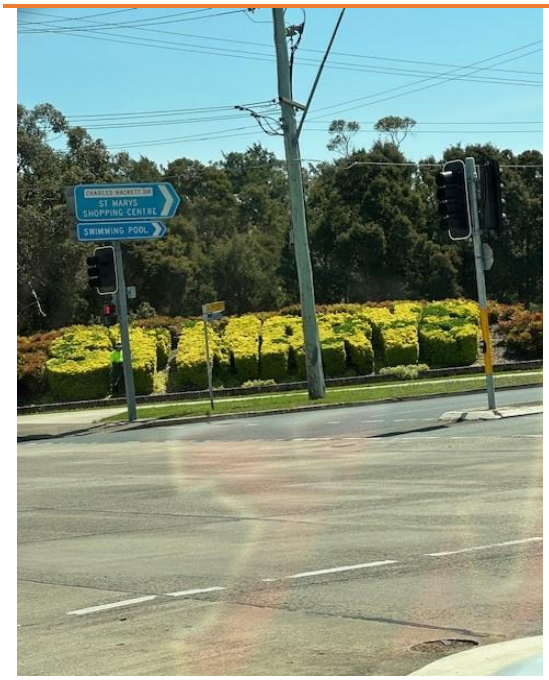
Three participants created a petition to light the local park which they proposed to take to the Local Member of Parliament. Participants explained what they were doing to the others and together they discussed how they could enhance the campaign. They wanted to take a time-lapse video showing the park getting darker to show to Council and politicians as part of their

campaign. Other participants agreed that this would be a good idea. Participants explored whether their phones would be sufficient or if they would need to borrow a camera.

Through these actions, participants demonstrated shared intentionality through seeking a common cause and have agreed on the collective values around what makes a park safe. Participants are also choosing something aspirational that they feel they can achieve. They continued to engage with the campaign after the research, and an update is provided at the end of this chapter.

FIGURE 4.13 PRIDE OF PLACE

St Mary's Sign



Flowers Opposite Mt Druitt Court House

One participant took a picture (see Figure 4.13) of the St Mary's sign that is made of hedge. They spoke about how that place is always neatly trimmed and that it provides pride for people in St Marys. It also makes them smile when they see it being so well-maintained.

Another participant took a picture of flowers close to the Mt Druitt train station and the Mt Druitt Courthouse, and spoke about how they made the place brighter and more welcoming.

The physical condition of homes affected some of the participants.

> **Megan:** "I wish that umm… they… because my house especially is very raggedy… the walls are paper thin; the like electricity cuts out randomly throughout the day and that I wish that they would just like come up and like re-do it in these like rougher neighbourhoods." *(interview)*

Many of the homes in Bidwill are public housing and Megan lives in public housing. These findings reflect the need for a restoration/rebuild of some of the public housing estates in Bidwill, many of which are more than 30 years old.

There was also discussion of other participants' family's perceptions of particular streets of the neighbourhood as dangerous or unsafe. Kayla spoke of how her parents would not let her visit Angel's home because they believed that particular street was dangerous.

The physical state of streets and houses also triggered feelings of shame with young people admitting to the researcher that they ask to be dropped off last at the end of Learning Ground programs as they do not want others to see where they live. The Learning Ground provides a bus to transport participants to and from programs, and participants are picked up and dropped off at home or at school.

Participants also noted the need to travel to get to a safe place to be with their friends e.g. Westfields Mt Druitt. Local shops were said to be generally unkempt with evidence of drug activity. Figure 4.14 shows the local shops in a suburb in Mt Druitt.

FIGURE 4.14 LOCAL SHOPS

The need for accessible transport also became a part of this conversation. Weekend buses and late-night buses altered their route to main roads leaving young people without safe transport home. Other tangible items relating to this theme were the condition of school equipment such as doors, chairs and school toilets, which were often in a state of disrepair or broken, as seen in Figure 4.15.

FIGURE 4.15 SCHOOL DOOR

This image was taken of a school door that the participant says is broken every week.

The damage to the school door is done by students as well as adults (parents of students/ex students). Participants reported that once the school fixes the door, it's broken again. Seeing this as they come into school makes the participant feel unsafe. When the door is damaged by an adult, it is more distressing for them as they feel adults should be behaving better, especially at a school with young people around. The physical state of these places impacted young people's social cohesion through the contrasts with neighbouring suburbs' infrastructure. These indicated a lack of equity and social justice.

Relational neighbourhood dynamics (subtheme 9)

Neighbourliness

Connection for young people was seen to be present where there were positive relationships in the neighbourhood. Participants spoke of how young adults could build connection in the neighbourhood through making space and ensuring safety for young children to play outdoors. Participants spoke of positive emotional and contributory support from neighbours which demonstrates high social capital. Safe relationships with neighbours also facilitated free movement for young people; they are able to play outside as well as move freely between homes.

> **Sasha: "**Umm… probably just like that, see I like the whole neighbourhood but one thing that so far would be my favourite part of living in the street that I live on is that one of the… these kids that are like maybe teenagers or older they full said to me and my brothers if we ever get bored and we are playing outside we can just go knock on their door and they will give us a basketball and we can use their basketball hoop." *(interview)*

> **Sarah:** "And sometimes even one of our neighbours like both of our… so the neighbour across the road and our actual neighbour they both have pools and one of the neighbours said whenever you get hot or whatever just come in and have a swim." *(interview)*

Adult behaviour

Adult violence, adult antisocial behaviour and police presence were reported as causing distress to young people who felt exposed to sub-optimal neighbourhood conditions they had no control over.

The behaviour of police was mentioned in relation to young people feeling targeted by police or when they had witnessed a police response to family members and to incidents at school.

> **Mika:** "I'd say that I feel like cops need to be educated more on skin colour because like, , they take a look at a white man, they ask questions before they shoot, they take a look at a black man, they shoot without questions and they need to be educated on that because like I said before, no mother wants to wake up and find out that, their child got shot because of the colour of their skin." *(Discussion group)*

> **Roy:** "My brother is mentally unstable and the cops hurt him. Like, they threw him to the floor……. Yeah so, I don't like the cops……. This was two years ago. He had done drugs and hung around with bad people and the bad people were caught by the police and my brother was put in a mental hospital and he ran away from the mental hospital – then he was put in a refuge and he ran away from the refuge, and then the cops found him and therefore he was a criminal." *(interview)*

> **Sasha:** "The cops jumped up the fence and they ran into the house. My brother ran and hid in the house with my mom and my mom was shouting don't take my son, don't take my son you dogs! cussing and I said don't mom! And my brother shouted don't mom!" *(Discussion group)*

Participants also encountered police in their day-to-day life with Sarah relating a story that demonstrates a fear and distrust of police even from an early age.

> **Sarah:** "I lived on chestnut and I was riding the bike with my cousins having the best time of our lives and they pulled up next to us and told us 'go home', 'you need a helmet' and I am riding back to my house and the cops said, 'You can walk the bike then!' And my cousin she is only nine, whenever she sees a cop she tries to fight them and she said "we gonna fight them" and I was like no we not, we gonna go home and get our helmets and ride". *(Discussion group)*

Participant encounters with police at home and on the street were not positive. Roy related how physical the police response had been towards his brother who had a mental illness. Roy

reported that the response could have been gentler in recognition of his brother's illness. Sasha's story also conveyed the dramatic response which she said frightened her. In Sarah's story, we see her cousin at nine years old showing distrust for police even when they are keeping her safe by asking her to wear her helmet while riding.

Participants expressed the need for police to understand diversity and spoke of incidences where they felt that friends or family had been targeted by police based on their background.

> **Cooper:** "Like with Samoan boys, if they hang out in the group then the police are watching them, like if you have a big group of dark boys and you look around, you are likely to see the cops looking at them and watching them." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Angel:** "We just need the cops to know that not all islanders [are the same] that they should be treated as an individual." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Casey:** "I guess, if you're Aboriginal, or if you're dark-skinned colour you get targeted by the cops." *(Discussion group)*

Brice related a story of his friend who went to prison. This was a friend who Brice thought would not have been imprisoned if he had not been Aboriginal. He acknowledges that his friend was associating with others already involved in crime, but he feels that his friend's arrest was unfair as others who were with him did not receive the same treatment.

The participants reported being concerned about the consequences of adult behaviour on young people growing up in Mt Druitt.

> **Thera: "**Yeah. Um, maybe for younger kids to understand the law better. Okay. Because I feel like kids our age and younger ages do what they want because they don't know the risks at all. Okay. Or maybe show kids like when they're in school that even though you've come from a bad upbringing or like you've been brought up around that, that it's okay not to follow those paths and like to make your own." *(Discussion group)*
>
> **Roy:** "There are a lot of people who drink alcohol and leave rubbish around some people also do drugs around there like they live stuff around that young people might not like. It makes me distressed like. I am mostly stressed because there is a lot of young people in the areas doing good in school and doing good for the community but there are some people that are not doing much for their community." *interview)*

In the quote above, Roy speaks of young people trying to make better choices, but the influences around them from observed adult behaviour are impacting their striving to be better.

Adult bullying and aggressive behaviour and use of illicit substances created uncertainty among young people and their ability to control the world around them. There were many behaviours that young people wished would stop to make neighbourhoods safer and more conducive to creating connection.

> **Brice:** "All the fights. All the fights that happen around there on the streets." *(interview)*
>
> **Sarah:** "Like basically everywhere even at the park on the paddock that's behind my sister's house there's a paddock and some people will be fighting and stuff, and yeah." *(interview)*

Figure 4.16, showing a sharps bin at the local health centre that was submitted by Steph further demonstrates that the presence of drugs in the neighbourhoods is something that the young people are aware of. The participants see young people trying to do the right thing but not having a good example in the behaviour of adults around them.

FIGURE 4.16 SHARPS BIN

Participant expressed gratitude that needles could be dispensed safely rather than left in parks for kids to play with. The presence of the bins also made them worried about drug taking in the neighbourhood.

Participant Participation

The presence of safe spaces and trusted adults, enabled young people to engage more actively in their community.

> **Karen:** "I help my mom with dog rescue. Like now we have this dog, I have the picture." It looks like my friends' dog *(Discussion group)*

> **Sasha:** "Yeah, I help out my mom, I have helped out at FUNPARK…. And then my mom helps out with the FUNPARK. One of my moms' friends that helps with FUNPARK she always asks my mom to help and I ask my mom if I can help too." *(Discussion group)*

However, this engagement, such as with Sasha, a 13-year-old girl, had to be initiated and supported by someone close to the participant, in this case a parent. Three of the older participants (aged 16 and 17) were already engaged in a youth leadership role for FUNPARK, a local arts festival celebrating Bidwill, a suburb in Mt Druitt. Their participation had been encouraged through their engagement with the Learning Ground.

Participants also spoke about how being able to volunteer helped them imagine more positive futures for themselves through seeing what they were capable of contributing.

> **Karen:** "When I am old enough I want a big house so we can have a place to house the dogs until their owner's find them." *(Discussion group)*

4.4 Participant Excursions

Though participants were eager to clean up the park, they were unable to for safety reasons. According to Structuration Theory, (Giddens, 1984; Loyal, 2003) the rules and policies that restricted their ability to clean the park form the structure within which young people can engage. In this case, the young people showed a desire and willingness to act (agency) but this willingness was constrained by existing structures. They however showed their ability to

use their agency to suggest an alternative demonstrating their awareness of the social structures that they existed in (Giddens, 1984).

Participants then asked for an excursion and one was organised where participants nominated the places they wanted to visit. One was an excursion to the new bridge that crosses the Nepean river at Penrith. Alderson (2008) encourages decision making for young people in even what seems to be small matters. For the excursion, the participants were able to name the places they wanted to visit, discuss routes to take, the snacks to have on the journey and also to visit the local McDonalds. This decision making encouraged their demonstration of agency and also allowed them to work with their peers.

Visit to the Yandhai Nepean Crossing

The Yandhai Nepean Crossing was opened in 2018 and is used by cyclists and pedestrians. Participants saw the new bridge as something that came about from ordinary people asking for and protesting for a change. The old bridge did not have a safe crossing for pedestrians resulting in accidents. The new bridge is a footpath with no vehicles. Participants visited the bridge as their last activity together along with a visit to Headspace Mt Druitt and the local community health centre. The bridge was the last stop on the excursion and participants took pictures for their PhotoVoice, walked across the bridge, watched the water and interacted together. Some made the comment that the excursion was the most memorable part of their participation.

FIGURE 4.17 THE NEW BRIDGE

Old Bridge

New Bridge

Visit to Headspace Mt Druitt

Participants included a visit to Headspace Mt Druitt as part of their final excursion. They met with staff and discussed how they can access some of the mental health support that is available for free through Headspace. It was noted that Headspace is near the train station and participants would need to organise transport to be able to access the service.

Visit to Mt Druitt Local Health WAAT Team

The Youth Health Service at the Mt Druitt Community Health Centre provides health services for young people aged 12-24. Participants were able to visit the youth rooms which allow for walk ins where young people can speak directly to a nurse, receive referrals for other medical support as well as a washing machine and some snacks.

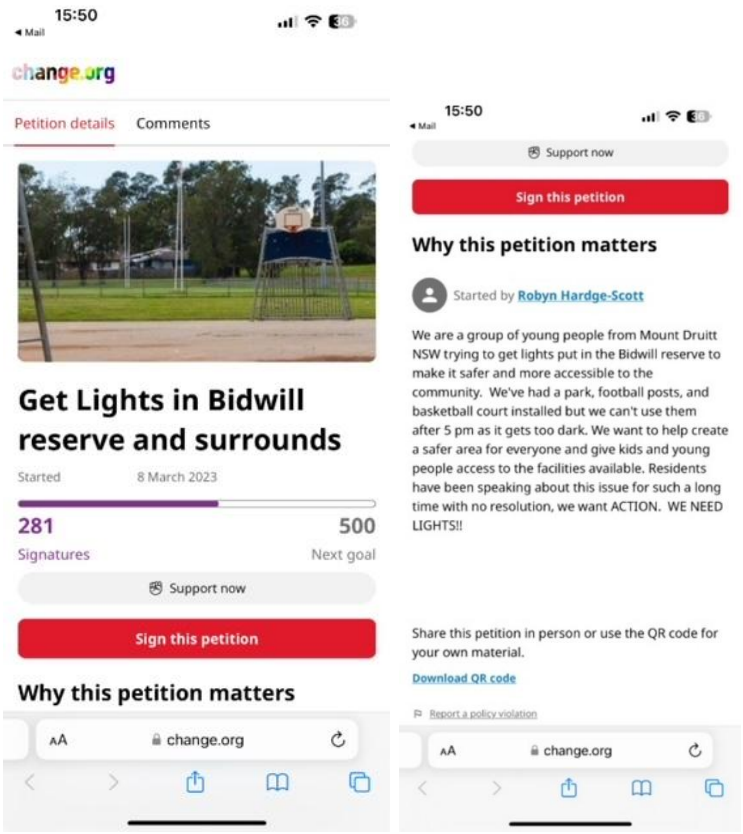
Visit White Lion Café

Thera asked the group to visit the White Lion Café, a not-for-profit organisation supporting young people to train as baristas and to learn in a work environment. Thera said they had received a lot of support from the service. These civic spaces and organisations are an essential part of the objects that young people interact with and interpret in their daily lives (Blumer, 1969).

4.5 Participant Activism: The Get Lights in Bidwill Reserve campaign

As of June 2024, 281 signatures had been obtained for the Get Lights in Bidwill Reserve campaign (see Figure 4.18). A letter was also submitted to the Local Member, and Kayla and Angel along with members of the community met with the Blacktown Mayor in Bidwill Reserve in November 2023.

FIGURE 4.18 GET LIGHTS IN BIDWILL RESERVE



The mayor came with key personnel from Blacktown City Council to discuss the need for lights in Bidwill Reserve. In June 2024, the conversation was still ongoing with Council, with local NFPs including the Chain Reaction Foundation, Bidwill Uniting, Youth Hope, The Hive Mt Druitt, and the Salvation Army all offering support for the young people's bid for lights via a local coalition called Together in Bidwill. One of the bureaucrats present raised the potential for lights in the reserve could bring a different kind of criminal activity.

> "if you have lights you will have moths, if you do not have lights you will have cockroaches." What you need to decide is if you want to live with cockroaches or moths."

The effort to have lights and to clean the park demonstrates some of the powerlessness experienced by young people when engaging with decision makers advocating for change that will have impact on young people's daily lives. For the park clean-up, the need to keep young people safe from exposure to the glass and needles from the park is considered more important than their need to contribute to having a clean park that they can enjoy. Again, as with the lights, the bureaucrat's comments raise issues of adult behaviour that are beyond the young people's control. In September 2024, Blacktown Council put three lights in Bidwill Reserve and two benches.

4.6 Conclusion

This Chapter presented the findings from the PAR with participants from the Mt Druitt Learning Ground. The findings from this research have highlighted that family and friendships where young people feel heard, supported and understood are central to a young person's feeling of connection and hence social cohesion. It also highlighted the importance of the neighbourhoods where young people are growing up in terms of the infrastructure, the relationships and the diversity of individuals in their neighbourhoods. Participants were

influenced by their ability and confidence to manage social interactions, to make friends and to communicate with adults in authority. The 'how to' of social interactions and access to space to discuss their feelings with confidentiality in safe places supported young people's social cohesion. Civic bodies also influenced young people's access to nurturing spaces and to activities that supported their growth as civic-minded individuals by supporting young people's volunteering.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how the themes and subthemes identified answer the research questions and also discuss the practical and theoretical implications of the findings.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Chapter 4 presented the findings from the participatory research conducted with 19 young people attending the Mt Druitt Learning Ground. Four themes were identified, namely: Interpersonal Relationships, Skills Learning, Understanding Diversity and Neighbourhood Dynamics. This research aimed to identify adolescent perspectives on social cohesion, recognising them as the society of the future. Social cohesion is a societal concept (Chan et al., 2006), is multifaceted (Jenson, 2010), and intersectional (Moran & Mallman, 2019). An exploratory study with adolescents as co-researchers provided an opportunity to demonstrate an adolescent perspective on social cohesion research and policy. In the following sections the findings of the research are presented in response to the research questions set out in this study. Discussion follows on whether they agree with or depart from the existing scholarship. The end of the chapter presents some policy and practice implications for social cohesion scholars, policy makers and practioners.

Section 5.1 is presented under each of the five pillars/domains of social cohesion as identified by the Scanlon Social cohesion index (Belonging, Social Justice and Equity, Acceptance/Rejection, Participation and Worth). Under each domain, the thesis explains adolescent perspectives and draws on existing literature to identify the nuances of adolescent social cohesion. Section 5.2 then highlights new components to social cohesion when considered from an adolescent perspective. These are;1) the centrality of interpersonal relationships and 2) access. 5.3 presents how these two components can be used to tailor current frameworks of social cohesion and these are presented by focusing on the actors in social cohesion (the individual and institutions) as posited by Beauvais and Jensen (2002).

A new approach to social cohesion from an adolescent perspective is presented in 5.4 which demonstrates how the thesis findings; 1) the centrality of interpersonal relationships and 2) access; can be used to tailor existing social cohesion frameworks to ensure that adolescent perspectives are captured. Table 5.1 demonstrates this tailoring of Chan et, al. (2006)'s two by two social cohesion framework and section 5.4 offers suggested statements that can form an instrument to measure social cohesion in adolescents. In keeping with the theoretical framing of the study, the micro, meso and macro considerations for adolescent social cohesion are presented. Policy and practice implications are proposed in 5.6. followed by a discussion on the limitations of the study.

5.1 RQ1 - What Existing Domains of Social Cohesion Measurement Are Relevant to Adolescent Youth?

The young people who participated in the project are marginalised and are considered at risk of isolation with their education at risk. Their perspectives and their experiences during the research provide an insight into how they interact with current social cohesion domains.

Research with a group of young people in a low socioeconomic group, some from minority racial groups and experiencing many risk factors including the risk of disengaging from school, offer a unique opportunity for understanding social cohesion and the risks to social cohesion from a marginalised adolescent perspective. The preeminent measure for social cohesion in Australia, the Scanlon Index for Social Cohesion has made social cohesion an adult concept by excluding the adolescent voice and adolescent participation. At present, adolescents are not included in this annual conversation that engages policy makers across five domains of social cohesion. This research has demonstrated that the adolescent

perspective is present across all five domains of Belonging, Social Justice and Equity, Worth, Participation and Acceptance and Rejection. Their perspective is discussed below.

5.1.1 Belonging

This research demonstrated nuances between adolescent belonging and current belonging domain. Young people in this research see belonging differently to how it is normally conceptualised in the literature and for them, belonging was seen, felt and supported through their close interpersonal relationships with family and friends. In Australia, belonging has been measured by the Scanlon Index for Social Cohesion as specifically relating to belonging to Australia and an Australian way of life. In 2021, the Scanlon research acknowledged that even for adults, a sense of belonging to Australia was no longer a strong indication for this domain, and it added questions on belonging in community and neighbourhoods to its survey.

Young people also found it difficult to engage with the idea of an Australian way or belonging to Australia. Australia was discussed in terms of beaches, native animals and places of significance like Uluru. For young people, belonging was observed in the interactions with friends, peers, and with family, making the nurturing of these relationships relevant to a framework on adolescent social cohesion. It is in relationship with their friends that young people first feel safe, supported, and have a shared identity.

Peer relations become increasingly important to young people during adolescence (Tinson, 2009b). From the findings in this research, adolescent perspectives on belonging demonstrate that there is opportunity to regard adolescence as an age of significance for social cohesion where personal and familial values clash with group norms that may not always be positive. This was demonstrated with participants having an awareness that some of the groups they wished they belonged to exposed them to behaviours that were not in their best interests. We

also saw from Megan and Michelle that while their friendship group provided them with space to belong, their behaviour at school was making them more isolated from teachers and peers. However, their friendship group provided a social structure in which they were accepted. Within the group of friends who are described by Megan and Michelle as "people like me", their lack of acceptance by the wider school environment was a reason for them to join together. Through these signals if rejection, they construct identities for themselves linking with others facing similar rejection. Participants like Roy admitted to being aware that some activities within the popular group were not ideal for their development but the pressure to conform in order to belong was strong. Other social cohesion research with adolescents has found that the search for belonging, while having the capacity for positive impact; is what often leads young people to seeking belonging in extremist groups (Lewis et al., 2019; Stead, 2017).

This search for or focus on belonging presents a risk for social cohesion researchers, as it may lead them to equate a sense of belonging with social cohesion, overlooking other important domains of social cohesion. Researchers like Martins et al., (2017) write of the dark side of social cohesion where this need to belong exposes young people to risky decisions like binge drinking. This research demonstrated that young people had an awareness of the negative behaviour of some of the ingroups they belonged to or wished to belong to, but that there was pressure to conform and to engage in activities that young people know to be unhealthy or contrary to their values. The challenge for social cohesion measurement of belonging in adolescence is that their belonging particularly to friendship groups may not be a positive measure for social cohesion if the friendship groups perpetuate exclusionary or antisocial behaviour. However, when belonging encompasses multiple relations such as family, friends and peers and then is extended to school and community, it can act as a protecting factor in adolescent risk-taking behaviour (Magson et al., 2016).

Participants like Megan and Michelle whose sense of belonging is supported primarily by friendship belonging and feel excluded from the rest of the school are at greater risk of social isolation.

The diversity of family backgrounds provided insight into how relationships within the family rather than the composition of the family had an impact on adolescent social cohesion. Participants identified family breakdown and lack of communication as the risk factors that limit their sense of belonging. Angel's unresolved tension in her family and her separation from both parents remained a source of exclusion. Other participants in grandparent care did not demonstrate the same tensions. Family cohesion which is demonstrated by feelings of closeness and togetherness supports the development of a young person as part of a community, and impacts their approach to social relations (Cheng et al., 2021).

The findings from this research have demonstrated the importance of the family and friendships in adolescent social cohesion. Fractures in interpersonal relationships led to exclusion and isolation for young people. Consistent with developmental theories (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Tudge et al., 2016), families formed a young person's sense of self which was supported by how young people felt when relating to their family members.

Even scholars who have taken a minimalist approach to social cohesion, removing the socioeconomic factors from the conversation (Chan et al., 2006), agree that the individual is central to the measurement and the practice of social cohesion. This is because it is the individual and their interactions with each other and with society that form a society (Bourdieu, 1990). The findings clearly showed that for young people, these interactions with

society began at the micro-level with family. These interactions at the micro-level impacted social cohesion or a sense of belonging to the society. This is supported in the literature by Beaujot and Ravanera's (2001) observations on how family can support the formation of social capital.

Belonging to family and the increased importance of friendships during adolescence was clearly demonstrated in this research. The nuance of adolescent belonging is important in the measuring adolescent social cohesion. Also, of importance is how this belonging can be supported. This will be discussed under Research Question 2 as the research suggests a distinction to adolescent social cohesion.

5.1.2 Social Justice and Equity

The location of this research highlighted aspects of social cohesion for adolescents that demonstrated the Social Justice and Equity domain. Within Neighbourhood dynamics, participants in the study showed awareness of negative stereotypes associated with their neighbourhood and related that to their own capacity to feel safe and to belong. The findings indicate the relational aspects of a neighbourhood as well as its structural components. Participants observed the state of parks and local shopping centres and how their dilapidated states differed from facilities in neighbouring suburbs, thus highlighting issues of social justice and inequity. Young people interacted in school with peers from more affluent and newer suburbs such as Ropes Crossing and Penrith.

Blacktown Council is the largest local government area (LGA) in NSW. Within that LGA, The Ponds is a suburb that is in the top 1% in the country for economic advantage and Bidwill where this research was conducted is in the bottom 1% for socioeconomic disadvantage (ABS 2022). These disparities in income were evident to young people who

observed infrastructural differences, and the impact of these differences was demonstrated in the young people's expression of hopelessness about their locale. This is clearly demonstrated by the quote: "nothing good comes out of Bidwill".

This place-based stigma was also manifest in how young people spoke about travelling to other places such as Penrith which had better and more well-maintained infrastructure to socialise with friends. Their choice during this research to have an excursion to a picnic spot in Penrith further demonstrated this awareness of environmental differences and lack of access for young people growing up in Mt Druitt. Participants in social housing reported feelings of shame and embarrassment, such as wanting to be the last one dropped off after Learning Ground programs; hinting at in internalisation of the stigma. Using photovoice allowed research participants to explain the meanings of the things that they took pictures of. This gives insight into how the young people's self-concept is being influenced by the things around them and also allows us into the "worlds" (Blumer, 1969, p. 11) that the young people live in. The sharp's bin in chapter 4 was both recognised for the purpose it served but it also spoke to Steph of the lack of safety in her neighbourhood through the prevalence of drugs. Other physical objects like the flowers opposite the courthouse and train station and the well-maintained St Mary's sign served to create beauty and pride of place. This finding demonstrates the effect of socioeconomic aspects of social cohesion.

These aspects are also called material and immaterial resources (Schiefer, 2017) evident over regions or geographic locations, in different cultural groups as well as socioeconomic groups. For young people, these are evident with tangible and intangible aspects. The tangible aspects are the availability of recreational facilities, the presence of safe places and neighbourhood centres, and the state of the infrastructure. In recent years scholars have begun exploring the

social reputations of places and their impact on health and life outcomes (Tran et al., 2020). Although I have not found a specific link in the literature between spatial stigma and social cohesion, it is evident in young people's experience of their neighbourhoods. Within Australian social cohesion studies, the Mapping Social Cohesion Report investigates whether individuals feel they are safe in their neighbourhood and whether they have positive relationships with their neighbours. The results chapter discussed this relational aspect of social cohesion for adolescents in their neighbourhoods. Participants reported feeling safe when neighbours shared resources, when participants could play safely and feel supported by older people around them (including both adults and young adults). This feeling of safety and connectedness is the intangible aspect of social cohesion in a neighbourhood, and is supported by social capital.

When I began this research, I thought technology would feature highly in the discourse of how young people connect and build a sense of self. While there was a recognition of ways that young people connect online, this cohort did not place as much emphasis on technology as other factors. The low socioeconomic profile of this particular cohort meant that access to both mobile technology and internet were limited. Though all participants had phones, only three of the participants identified online communities that they belonged to or interacted with. Their interaction with these spaces showed the potential for belonging and risks to social cohesion to emerge. Scholars like Johns (2014), Harris (2013) and Harris and Johns (2020) have demonstrated the impact of online spaces as opportunities to engage in social cohesion domains through digitised ways of belonging and identification.

This research showed that socioeconomic aspects such as parental income and education determine the neighbourhoods in which young people grow up, and this has consequences for

social cohesion. Although some scholars like Chan et al. (2006) and Schiefer and Van den Noll (2017) separate the socioeconomic aspects from social cohesion, this research agrees with the policy discourse that includes the socioeconomic domain in social cohesion (Jenson, 2002; Jenson, 2010; Markus & Druzenko, 2007).

5.1.3 Acceptance/Rejection

Discrimination and racism impact all the domains of social cohesion (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2013, 2015). Young people reported having observed racism in their interactions in community and in school with peers. Participants reflected on the experience of minority groups and reported on personal and observed discrimination based on race, sexuality and neurodiversity. This aligned with a majority of social cohesion studies in Australia that focus on race relations and immigration and their impact on social cohesion. The literature review highlighted the criticism of policy-related interventions that premise Eurocentric values and interpret social solidarity to mean sameness (Jenson, 2002; Johns, 2020). The young people in this research demonstrated the need to focus on creating opportunities to understand and to learn from each other. To them Australia offered an opportunity to create an understanding of the different cultural groups that young people were a part of. Megan's statement that "We would never block people from coming here. We don't block migrants like if someone is a refugee and they had to migrate because of war we would never not let that person in." demonstrates how acceptance of the other has become an Australian norm and identity. Moran (2017) posits that Australia's approach to Multiculturalism has been key to shaping our national identity. This shows the importance of institutions role is shaping norms and values. However racially diverse young people's everyday experience negated these norms. Discrimination towards minority races was also observed in peers and more importantly in adults: specifically, the

conduct of police. Young people stated that police targeted darker skinned young people and from participant perspectives this was a sign of ignorance.

Scholars agree that acceptance of diversity is important for social cohesion (Arant et al., 2021). This was also shown in the initial work on dimensions by Jenson (1998) and Bernard (1999). Though this research did not extensively explore the causes of acceptance/rejection, there was evidence at individual level of intergroup anxiety (Arant et al., 2021) when participants observed exclusionary behaviour in their peers. Intergroup anxiety hindered acceptance of diversity as participants feared that associating with those who are different could lead to them being excluded as well. This was demonstrated in young people's concern about exhibiting behaviours that may be perceived by peers to demonstrate sexual diversity such as choices in hairstyles.

Participants spoke about how being neurodivergent impacted their acceptance by peers and also their future outlook for work opportunities in the future. Other domains observed in this research were Participation and Worth which are discussed below.

5.1.4 Participation

As mentioned in the literature review adult participation in democratic states is centred on choice. However, this assumption of choice is often erroneously translated into social cohesion studies relating to young people (Harris, 2010). This thesis shows that participation in young people is supported by the availability of a trusted adult. This adult could be a parent or a teacher/community worker. There are aspects of participation as defined in the literature that young people because of age restrictions cannot engage in. These include voting and political participation. During the data collection, in the scenario where

participants were to imagine themselves as a Minister for Young People, participants were not aware of a Minister's role in government or society. They found it easier to engage with the idea of being Young Australian of the Year and speaking about the issues that they would advocate for.

Participation in things like community volunteering, when supported by an adult, was reported and observed as beneficial for research participants. The park clean ups provided an example on how young people's participation can be hindered and supported by both Local government and community organisations. Though young people were eager to clean the park, adults made the decision that it would not be safe for them to do so. However, the young people's willingness to participate in the maintenance of their local environment is something to be encouraged and fostered. Community organisations have an opportunity to work with young people to identify safe ways for them to participate.

5.1.5 Worth

Young people's conversations regarding their future and how to prepare for it showed that Worth as a domain was important to them. Participants aged 16 and 17 were particularly concerned about this domain as they felt unprepared to navigate the world of work. This is supported by the Scanlon Index's recent findings which has shown that 18 to 24-year-olds score low in this domain. In this domain there were also observations by participants of their different capabilities, and the need for a skillset that would allow them to find employment in future. Thera's request for schools to consider that not all young people had the same capabilities and that some may need a different approach to education spoke to this. An example was Cooper, who had already left school to start learning on the job.

The findings align with the theoretical framing of the study showing how young people create identities through everyday activities and particularly responding to signals in their peer groups and local community. They also demonstrate their ability to shape their social structures through agency.

5.2 RQ2 - By Using A PAR Approach that Enables Adolescents to Speak For themselves in their Own Terms What (if any) New Social Cohesion Domains Emerge?

This research has demonstrated that a number of current domains for social cohesion are relevant for young people. It observed nuances in some adolescent domains that are explained below and proposes new components to adolescent social cohesion that support an adolescent social cohesion framework.

5.2.1 The Centrality of Interpersonal Relationships in Adolescent Social Cohesion

Social relations are central to social cohesion (Green et al., 2011; Markus & Druzenko, 2007; Schiefer, 2017). As demonstrated in this research, interpersonal relationships were central to young people's perception of having connection. Social cohesion for young people is demonstrated relationally through their micro-environments (family and friendship groups) and experienced via the institutions through which they had access to peers e.g. school. Exclusion was also experienced in these same environments.

The domain of Belonging existed but there was a distinction to young people's belonging being centred on closer relationships rather than broader belonging to Australia. This nuance in belonging as well as the identification for social and life skills learning and the availability

of safe spaces present an opportunity to explore new components for adolescent social cohesion.

Some of the topics that young people said they needed support with included aspects of supporting mental health through supporting social relationships, in a way, a form of developing social capital. Definitions of social cohesion such as Fonseca (2019 p. 246) describe "an ongoing process of developing wellbeing, sense of belonging…" which supports this need in young people. In Fonseca's (2019) social cohesion framework, his proposed interconnecting levels of individual, community, and institutions are continuously interacting and supporting or hindering social cohesion. While the individual has remained central to the study of social cohesion, the individual's role has been evaluated based on their interaction with the world looking at their attitudes, feelings (Moreno, 1924, Asch, 1952 as cited in Fonsceca 2019), and interaction with group norms (Braaten, 1991). Fonseca's individual level identifies self-motivation, perceptions, norms and values which relate to Chan et al.'s (2006) subjective domain; and performance which is Chan et al.'s (2006) objective domain. Schiefer & Van der Noll, (2017) are also relevant to this with their core dimensions of social cohesion. This research has demonstrated that there is an opportunity to support the developing adolescent to have healthier social relations. This is expressed in young people's desire to learn and also in their expressed need for support in social and emotional learning. Younger participants' definition of belonging also demonstrates that in situations where an adult measure of social cohesion begins with attitudes and feelings, adolescent social cohesion has an opportunity to begin with the formation of attitudes and the interaction with perceived norms and values.

Friendship groups were important and this was demonstrated in participants' need to have a friendship group and also to be part of the popular group. A desire for social learning was noted in participants' needs to learn how to make friends, and participants' expressed powerlessness in needing to make friends but not knowing how to. Participants reported awareness of negative activities they would have to participate in because they wanted to be part of a particular group. Peer belonging in adolescents exposes them to risk factors that impact social cohesion (Harris & Johns, 2020; Lewis et al., 2019; Stead, 2017). This perspective shows that belonging is not just a structural goal but that there is a symbolic process that is supported and devalued in daily interactions. Peer relationships and informal group behaviour all shape the emotional experience of belonging.

In this research, young people prioritised belonging with friends over belonging in community or Australia, and their definition of belonging is aligned with acceptance by their friends and peers. Being "true to yourself" was offered as a solution. This raises the question of how young people might be supported to maintain their "true self" when navigating the need to belong where there is conflict in an adolescent's need to belong and group behavioural norms that were contrary to a participant's morality. However, the "true self" is in itself a social construct shaped by interactions at home and within the larger society. "Even when you feel most spontaneous and in touch with your 'true self' you do so within a social framework that gives rise to these types of experiences, validates some experiences (not others), and most of all guides their expression. (Grauerholz, 2012, p.vii). If young people consider their true selves to be a protective measure against peer pressure, how then is this supported? Where current social cohesion domains look at whether a person feels they belong, adolescent social cohesion must go more granular and ask adolescents if they feel

confident they can make a friend and if they know when a friend is disrespecting their "true self", and then how to let them know.

5.2.2 Access as A Component of Adolescent Social Cohesion

This thesis identifies access as an essential component in adolescent social cohesion. This access is facilitated through family and civic organistations in community. Access also introduces to social cohesion studies the role of the 'trusted adult'. Below, the roles of the family and community in adolescnet social cohesion are explained further.

Family

Though the role of family has been explored in studies in social cohesion (Beaujot & Ravanera, 2001; Cheng et al., 2021; Jenson, 2002) it is not consistently addressed in the measurement of social cohesion in Australia. Studies like Cheng et al. (2021) demonstrate that there is a correlation between family dynamics, the development of adolescent social awareness, and a social consciousness (or interdependent self-construal). This awareness of self as part of a relationship or network of relationships is fundamental to social cohesion. Beaujot and Ravanera (2001) view the family as a unit within the social cohesion system which together with the individual forms the micro-level. This research has demonstrated the role of family in three of the social cohesion domains (Belonging, Worth and Participation). Families introduced young people to causes that they supported (e.g. the dogs with Claudia) and supported their day-to-day engagement with the causes. Without family members introducing, supporting and even accompanying young people in volunteer activities their participation is impeded.

The family also played a role in Worth as it pertains to future outlook. Participants spoke of having no one at home who they could rely on to educate them about work and preparing for

the adult world. This is a finding that is supported by early debates on social cohesion and the role of social capital as exemplified in this quote from Willms (2001.p. 5) as cited in Beauvais and Jensen (2002).

> "For some people, social capital may help them gain access to better jobs and schooling; for others, wealth may help them develop and strengthen their social capital"

These explanations go back to the very conceptualisation of social capital where Pierre Bourdieu (1986) observed that some families were able to offer resources beyond material to their children and access to opportunities that were closed to others. This access to resources has an impact on social cohesion. The research participants, coming from a low socioeconomic environment were aware of gaps in their knowledge, and their families' knowledge that they feared would impact their ability to make the most of opportunities in future. Though the role of family exists in the plethora of social cohesion literature, it is a constituent of social cohesion that a literature search found it is not included, in contemporary social cohesion measures in Australia. The multidisciplinary approach to social cohesion creates a risk that some research may be left behind (Moustakas, 2022) and attempts in the early the 2000s to narrow the concept of social cohesion have left out components that are central in adolescent social cohesion.

Though the role of the family is not new, it is included as an aspect influencing access; a new component of adolescent social cohesion. Like other measures of social cohesion that look only at micro measures while ignoring the macro, there is potential to stigmatise the families and communities when including their role in social cohesion without taking into account structural inequities that perpetuate disadvantage (Moran & Mallman, 2019). Any measure of adolescent social cohesion that examines family life will need to be cognisant of historical and ongoing social inequities in the families and their neighbourhoods. Kayla's discussion

about her aunt having to teach herself about renting and getting a job reveals some of the potential for stigmatisation of an already vulnerable family.

Community

Community is an actor in adolescent social cohesion in the day-to-day interactions between young people and their immediate environment. Within Mt Druitt's low socioeconomic environment, adult anti-social behaviour impacted young people's feeling of safety. Studies have shown that neighbourhood social cohesion can have an impact on adolescent mental health (Williams, 2020) and this was evident in adolescents' self-perception being influenced by their environment.

The role of civic society organisations in community is important in social cohesion. Moran and Mallman (2019) state that while there are risks that social cohesion could mask systemic issues impacting social cohesion, there is an opportunity at a local level for practical and relevant interventions that support social cohesion. Within this research, findings on the role of civil society organisations in supporting young people's participation, access to trusted adults and access to safe spaces support this assertion. Participants spoke of volunteering and supporting others and local festivals through civic organisations. For participants who were part of the campaign to Get Lights in Bidwill Reserve, civic organisations provided supervision, spaces and resources to help the young people develop and advocate for ideas that impacted their daily lives. This mediating role that civic organisations provide is important in assisting young people to engage with social cohesion domains. Here it is clear that the access to "a trusted adult" is crucial to adolescent social cohesion where access cannot be provided by a family member.

5.3 RQ3 - How Might Current Models Be Better Tailored for Adolescent Youth?

Having considered how adolescent perspectives align or depart from current social cohesion domains, the next section looks at how current models can be tailored for adolescent use. Focusing on the actors in social cohesion as exemplified by Beauvais and Jensen (2002), this thesis reflects on the research findings in this section.

The Individual

Social cohesion scholars agree that social cohesion is an attribute of a society or a group and not an individual. Therefore, an individual alone cannot have social cohesion (Green et al., 2011; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). However, it is the individual's interaction in society through relationships with others and with society itself that define social cohesion. Adolescents in their search for belonging and their willingness to change their actions to fit in provide a challenge and an opportunity in social cohesion scholarship. This research highlighted participants' desire and sometimes inability to make and keep friends and experiencing exclusionary behaviour. Participant observations demonstrate symbolic boundaries determined by whether one is in the "in group" or "out group". Being with the "in group" is a socially constructed identity that carries social meanings of inclusion, status and safety. This is demonstrated in this quotation from Angel "*You think* that if you are friends with them then you will be accepted. But if you are not, *you think* you are an outcast." We see the interpretation of the objects that Angel is interacting with in wanting to belong to this group (Blumer, 1969). She then groups herself with friends who she sees facing similar rejection. She finds belonging in this way but still sees herself as a social outcast. It is further affirmed by another participant's comment that "I wish that people that are with their friends, if they see anyone alone, they could just try and make a connection". The wish to "make a connection" shows a desire to change the existing state and the other's "reaching out" a

change in behaviour that challenges the existing boundary between the in group and out group. According to symbolic interactionism, these seemingly small actions/ moments/ gestures carry symbolic weight in determine who gets to belong. From a structuration perspective, participant experiences illustrate the tension between structure and agency (loyal, 2003). As well as making friends, adolescents emphasised other individual level psycho-social learnings that they felt they needed to develop in order to foster social cohesion.

Already such a broad concept, scholars argue that social cohesion is already so complex as to almost render it academically ineffective. This research also showed in some participants the transfer of the external to the internal feelings of worth e.g. the dilapidated state of neighbourhood infrastructure translating to a low self-value, and feelings of being excluded leading to statements like “they will never accept us”.

From its earliest conceptions, social cohesion has been concerned about the evolution of society and the preservation of healthy social relationships among individuals. Within Practice Theory (Bourdieu, 1990) habitus is defined as deeply internalised ways of thinking, that influence a person’s perception of the world and that can be reproduced generationally. The participants in this research have identified topics that they would like to discuss with a trusted adult and for some, their immediate families could not provide this support. This research then leads to the question: *can the development of the individual be removed from social cohesion conversation?* The adolescent perspective challenges this. There is still an influence on the developing individual that will have consequences for their interaction with society and therefore, social cohesion.

Social cohesion scholars believe in the creation of shared values and I posit that the building of trust in a multicultural and evolving society is in "making the unknown known". The habitus can therefore never be a static thing forced upon individuals but individuals remain active in its creation and recreation. Gidden's Structuration Theory supports the assertion of human agency to both bring about social change or to reproduce social structures (Giddens, 1984; Loyal, 2003). While Giddens does not give primacy to either structure or agency in his social theory, the individual's sense of self must have primacy in adolescent social cohesion. To my knowledge, current social cohesion measures are not accounting for self-development. The sense of self in adolescence is forming and evolving and it is its evolution in interaction with society that impacts social cohesion in future. In saying it should take primacy, I do not dismiss the structural influences on an adolescent's social reality, but rather the primacy of supporting adolescent agency must be at the forefront of adult interventions supporting social cohesion.

Institutions

Fonseca et al. (2019)' argue that the role of institutions in social cohesion is currently lacking. The adolescent's positioning as a minor, unable to make decisions for themselves, makes them reliant on institutions. Adolescents bring the argument on the role of institutions in social cohesion to the forefront, as it is their interaction with the various institutions that are supposed to nurture, shape and protect them which are vital to their sense of social cohesion and trust. This is evident in young people's relationship to the family, schools, government authorities like police and civic bodies. These all influence a young person's social cohesion.

Participants identified school as a place for building connection and for learning, but it is also where they experienced exclusion. Education is connected to social cohesion as the pathway to a better livelihood for individuals (Gradstein & Justman, 2000; Kapoor et al., 2017; Moustakas, 2023), and the participants in the project attend the Learning Ground because they are already identified as being at risk of disengaging from school. Their perspectives on school varied, and as already mentioned they saw it as both a safe place, and a place of exclusion. Moving out from family as the first institution where participants experienced belonging and exclusion, school and school friendship groups were also found to be important factors in adolescent social cohesion.

In addition to better economic outcomes for young people attending school, researchers posit that school is a place where societal values (Nowack & Schoderer, 2020) and norms can be learned and explored thus affirming the school's role from a functionalist perspective. The school environment introduces young people to diverse groups and diverse experience. In this research, participants attributed racism and discrimination not to malice but to a lack of understanding. While the nature of school, in particular public schooling, is diverse, young people in this research spoke of lack of opportunity to discuss or learn beyond the school curriculum. Sociologists would argue that the learning is in the interaction between individuals, however young people asked for more explicit learning in their school education on matters of social and life skills, including understanding diversity.

5.4 A Framework for Social Cohesion in Adolescence

The move towards the use of domains of social cohesion in the late 1990s and 2000s (Jenson, 2010; Markus & Druzenko, 2007) broadened the understanding of social cohesion both in academia and at the policy level. While there are scholars still looking at defining social

cohesion (Fonseca et al., 2019; Moustakas, 2023), arguments remain for both narrowing the definition of social cohesion and expanding it.

As discussed in previous sections, participants were able to demonstrate the subjective components of social cohesion, reflecting their state of mind, as well as the objective components that relate to their actions (Chan et al., 2006). Within the subjective components, participants highlighted the differences in belonging; the role of family and friendships, and understanding diversity and their relationships with neighbours. Adolescents also demonstrated objective components that spoke of their behaviour in specific situations, and also objective components related to social justice and equity.

This research also demonstrated adolescents' ability to engage with social cohesion domains at micro, meso and macro levels (Bottoni, 2018) However, both Chan et al. (2006) and Bottoni (2018) take a minimalist approach to social cohesion, leaving out key socioeconomic components that the young people taking part in this research identified through both their community mapping and photo elicitation. Chan et al.'s (2006) two-by-two framework which informed Bottoni's (2018) social cohesion scheme provides a basis for Table 5.1 below. This suggests a new way to look at adolescent social cohesion, i.e., the interaction between both objective and subjective components when looking to measure social cohesion. Their suggestions of horizontal and vertical interaction support the fact that social cohesion is multifaceted and aligns with adolescent developmental theory. However, unlike Chan et al., (2006), I would assert that the socioeconomic aspects which support the Social Justice and Equity domain are an essential part of adolescent social cohesion.

To articulate social cohesion from the adolescent perspective, a three-by-three framework is indicated below. Within this framework is a recognition of both subjective (frame of mind components) and objective components. Under the objective components, behaviour and access are separated to distinguish the role that accessibility plays in supporting adolescent social cohesion. The horizontal dimension focuses on adolescent friendships and their belonging. Though identified as an institution, Family is placed within the horizontal dimension as it is the primary relationship with which young people interact with the world.

Unlike the Chan et al. (2006) approach, the adolescent's relationship to civil society is considered a vertical relationship, recognising the power dynamics inherent with any adult-adolescent relationship. The same is true for the State-Citizen dimension. Based on the results of this research, I propose a three-by-three framework where the adolescent institution relationship goes beyond the state (politics) to encompass civic bodies, schools, and government departments.

This framework is presented in table 5.1 in table form and is followed by 3 tables suggesting statements that can be used to measure adolescent social cohesion.

TABLE 5.1 A FRAMEWORK FOR ADOLESCENT SOCIAL COHESION

	Subjective Component (Adolescent Frame of Mind)	**Objective Component**	
		Behavioural	**Access**
Horizontal Relational Cohesion/Micro	Sense of belonging or identity. Belonging with friendship groups. Belonging with family.	Participation in friendship groups, confident in making friends.	Family presence. Access to places where friendships can be developed. Knowledge of a trusted adult they can relate to.

Vertical Cohesion within Civil Society/Meso	General trust with fellow citizens. Relationships with neighbours and interactions with civil society. Willingness to cooperate and help fellow citizens, including those from ‘‘other’’ social groups. Feeling safe in their communities.	Voluntarism. Use of community facilities. Diversity of social groups. Behaviour in community.	Access to community facilities, Opportunities to volunteer and diverse groups in society. Presence of trusted adults to facilitate access.
Vertical Cohesion/Macro	Teacher student relationships. Safety within school, trust towards authority figures, confidence in their futures.	School engagement. Actions towards future. Interaction with police and government departments.	Access to schools, health services. Level of differentiation within schools to support diverse students. Structural state of the neighbourhood. Life skills knowledge.

Under the objective component, the separation of behaviour and access is proposed for adolescent social cohesion. The findings presented in this research demonstrate how participation was facilitated by the presence of family or a trusted adult. Access to a trusted adult and to infrastructure and support services is thus an important component in adolescent social cohesion, as it focuses on inequalities in opportunities. The socioeconomic background of participants highlighted neighbourhood differences that showed the importance of access to young people’s experience of social cohesion.

The proposed framework attempts to cover the broadness of social cohesion in present dimensions while extending it to include other important factors impacting a young person. Moustakas (2023) challenges researchers to engage more deeply in understanding the role of individuals and communities in social cohesion.

> “Further elucidating and disentangling social cohesion will require researchers to not only develop or test statistical models exploring these interrelations, but to also pursue deep qualitative insights into the understanding and experiences of individuals” (Moustakas 2023, p. 1034).

Like Chan et al. (2006), this framework helps to develop key questions in adolescent social cohesion. In Table 5.1 above, the horizontal and vertical components have been categorised into micro, meso and macro (Bottoni, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Taking a lead from Chan et al. (2006), the categories are used in Tables 5.2, 5.3, and 5.4 below to suggest statements that can form an instrument to measure social cohesion. The instrument would measure participant responses on a Likert scale. The scale would measure the intensity of participant feelings (agree / disagree) between one to five. In each of the categories, subjective and objective measures are presented. These categories also take into consideration the questions currently used in the Scanlon Index for Social Cohesion and Chan et al.'s (2006) proposed questions and statements in their four-by-four framework; they are supported by the additional insights gained from the adolescent perspectives found in this research project.

At micro-level, the sample statements seek to determine the level of belonging that adolescents have articulated on being associated with family and friends. The statements also probe the need for social and emotional learning when determining the level of confidence young people have in making friends. The statement on disagreeing with friends generates an understanding of the safety of friendships groups. As discussed earlier and as also highlighted by participants, adolescents become more vulnerable by their need to change their behaviour in order to belong to particular groups.

TABLE 5.2 SAMPLE QUESTIONS – MICRO-LEVEL

Horizontal dimensions – Cohesion with family and friends/Micro
I like myself
I have confidence in myself
I have a group of friends in my community or at school
I am able to make friends
I can tell my friends when I disagree with them
I feel close to my family

I can tell my family when I disagree with them I have a trusted adult I can talk to and who can help me My friends and I have places in my neighbourhood we can hang out

The meso-level also looks at both subjective and objective measures and, in this measure, access is explored more deeply. Statements seek insights about trusted adults and safe places and also explore the neighbourhood dynamics that were raised in this research. Opportunities to volunteer are also explored and supported by the statements about a trusted adult they could ask if they did want to volunteer. In this research, young people's volunteering is supported by family or civil society organisations.

TABLE 5.3 SAMPLE QUESTIONS – MESO-LEVEL

Vertical dimension - Cohesion within civil society/Meso
I have good relationships with my neighbours
In my neighbourhood we help each other out when needed
I feel safe walking around my neighbourhood
I have experienced or seen others being excluded because of race, sexuality or being neurodivergent
I have an adult I can ask questions about sensitive topics like of race, sexuality or being neurodivergent
I have safe places I can go to close to me
I volunteer in my school and neighbourhood
If I wanted to volunteer, I know an adult I can ask

The macro level focuses on institutions that interact the most with young people and also how they experience their local area. School is an important community for adolescents and one of the primary institutions with which they engage with the world.

TABLE 5.4 SAMPLE QUESTIONS – MACRO-LEVEL

Vertical dimension -state-citizen Cohesion/Macro
I like my school and feel supported by my teachers
I attend school regularly
I am in the right class group at school
I can easily get to school
I have opportunities to learn life skills that will help me later in life
I feel confident about my future
I trust the police
There is good infrastructure in my area

In the current literature, social cohesion's meaning is entangled with its causes and consequences. This study sought to expand understanding of social cohesion from an adolescent perspective through a participatory approach. Rather than separating dimensions and definitions, academics need to accept the complexities of social cohesion as a reflection of the complexities of social structures. Social cohesion's definitions and dimension remain dependent on our evolving understanding of social theory.

5.6 Policy and Practice Implications

Academics like Lewis (2017;2019) argue that social cohesion has been abused by political ideologies and hijacked by the politically ambitious to the extent that it is now difficult to understand its true meaning in public discourse. There is agreement here from scholars like Harris and Johns (2016) and Dandy and Pe Pau (2013). As a result of these scholars and media representations of social cohesion, it would almost seem counter intuitive to re-educate the public on social cohesion's true meaning from its conception through to its evolution across various disciplines. This public confusion is reflected in academia's continuous attempt to define and characterise social cohesion. Indeed, in the conduct of this research, I have debated the usefulness of the term social cohesion given both the media and policy positioning of the term and the fact that adolescents themselves do not understand it.

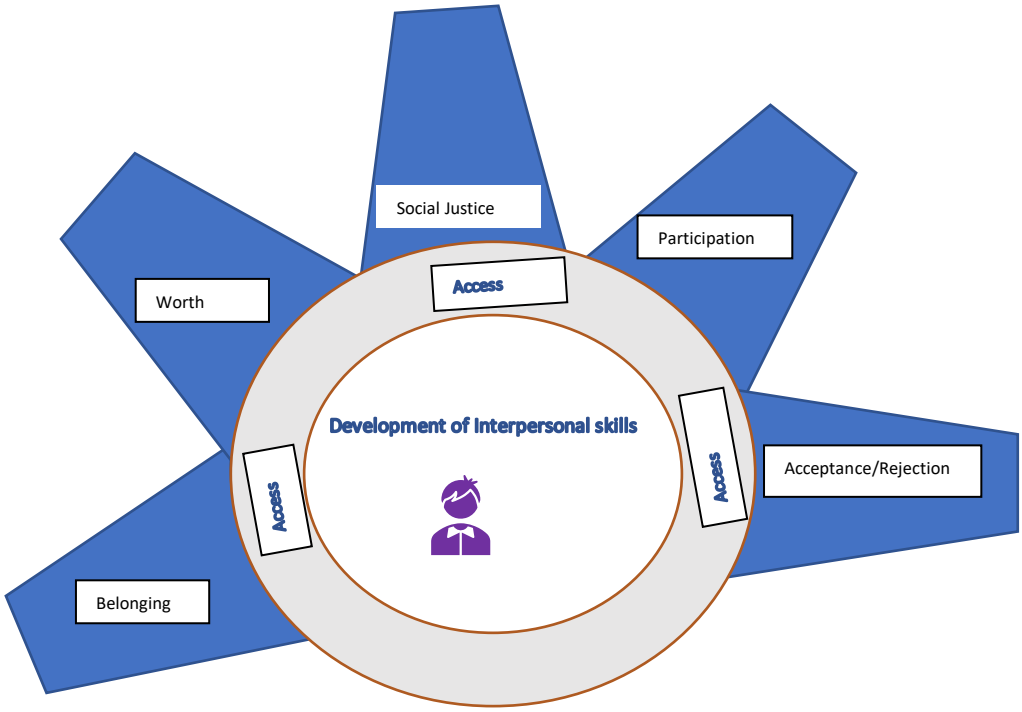
Social cohesion is criticised for its claims to be "not only *a good thing* but also *good for* many other good things" (Swain & Urban, 2024, p. 27). It suffers not only from the chicken and egg dilemma in terms of what comes first, but also in the different ways in which the egg or the chicken must be cooked. However, it is also evident from recent contributions (Moustakas, 2022, 2023) that academia must continue to engage with this term and wrestle with its practicality in its domains, its measurement, and how it can provide both a footing and a growing understanding of society and its functioning. Policy interest in social cohesion is a challenge for academics to solidify it as a concept which would make it harder to fall prey to political posturing. There is no doubt that the concept has been abused in the political and policy realms and used in agendas that sought to make some things more visible while rendering others invisible (Swain & Urban, 2024). Social cohesion is an academic concept and academics must rescue it via rigorous study and solidification, and through strengthening its links to social theory. Swain & Urban (2024) urge for "bringing the concept back to earth" (p.80) through; 1) analysing policy programs purporting to support social cohesion, articulating what they do and who benefits from them and/or; 2) going back to analyse the things that hold society together rather than take them as given or; 3) to let social cohesion remain an active contested space that challenges emerging issues and maintains a critical link to issues of social justice. Chapter 2, discussed Bernard (1999)'s caution to academics to not settle too soon on a definition of social cohesion. For now, social cohesion, like other terms in sociology must remain contested (Etzioni, 2000).

> "We have difficulties in precisely defining even such a simple concept as a chair. Something to sit on? One can sit on a bench or bed. Something to sit on with four legs? Many chairs have three, or even just one, and so on. The same criticism has been levelled against rationality, democracy, and class, yet nobody seriously suggests we stop using these concepts". (Etzioni, 2000, p.1)

This thesis adds to this contested space by placing young people's perspectives of the social cohesion domains into the debate and by demonstrating the components that facilitate young people's social cohesion.

The Scanlon Index has given Australia a consistent measure for social cohesion and the domains articulated there are the basis for how policy bodies and civic organisations have organised their social cohesion interventions. The adolescent perspectives in this research give us a new way of thinking through the social cohesion domains, challenging us to prioritise interpersonal relationships and access. The diagram below demonstrates visually what this looks like in practice. Interpersonal skills and access are positioned to demonstrate their centrality to adolescent social cohesion. The articulation and operationalisation of these two components will enable adolescents to add to the social cohesion discourse. They also enable policies that seek to support social cohesion in young people to become more effective.

FIGURE 5.1 OPERATISING ADOLESCENT SOCIAL COHESION



Unless young people are included in social cohesion, then society is missing the opportunity to engage them in conversations that will shape the future of society. It was evident in the

findings from this research that all five domains that currently exist in the Scanlon Index were identified by young people as having an impact on their connection. This demonstrates that what is important for the understanding and measurement of social cohesion is clarity on the relevant domains and components of social cohesion, as was postulated by Jenson (1998). Further research in this area could look at measuring specific domains for adolescent social cohesion. This research contributes new components highlighting the centrality of *interpersonal relationships* and *access* to adolescent social cohesion.

For practitioners, social cohesion remains a useful term in understanding the objectives of specific programs and interventions working with young people. It also provides a framework through which local providers can support their constituents. Swain & Urban (2024)'s proposition to examine the programs that support social cohesion and articulate what they do, and, who benefits from them, is important for practioners. This requires practioners to question the intrinsic, often unstated agendas and value systems that are promoting particular programs. As well as its academic contribution, this thesis contributes an articulation of the components and domains that civic society and institutions working with young people can engage with both to measure and evaluate social cohesion programs. In considering the component of *access* practioners must be wary of competing agendas particularly if they find themselves in the role of the trusted adult who is facilitating access.

5.6.2 Purposeful and practical implementation

Swain and Urban (2024)'s challenge to analyse and articulate social cohesion, offers a first step for practioners and organisation working for social cohesion, one of self-examination. This purposeful analysis and articulation will help shape the discourse and interventions that are said to address social cohesion. Moran and Mallman (2019) also state that there is an

opportunity at a local level for *practical and relevant* interventions that support social cohesion. It will also address the challenges of social cohesion by requiring that organisations and policies that use the term explain HOW they are addressing social cohesion. The Adolescent social cohesion framework proposed in this thesis provides a structure that can inform how organisations position and examine their social cohesion intervention.

The framework considers the micro, meso and macro levels and adolescents' interaction with each of them. However, the framework further elucidates this by demonstrating the different components of adolescent social cohesion, the subjective component and the objective components (which are behavioural and access). Using this framework, organisations can be more granular in their examination of how their organisations support social cohesion. This articulation will make it easier for them to be systematic about the activities they engage in. Organisations working with young people could start with asking themselves the following three questions.

1. Which level the intervention will target (micro, meso, macro)?
2. How they will ensure access?
3. Who are the trusted adults who will support this work?

TABLE 5.5 THINKING THROUGH SOCIAL COHESION PROGRAMS

Who are the young people the program is for?	**Which level will the program target**	**Program supports interpersonal development**	**Program supports access**	**Which social cohesion pillar does the program support**
	Micro	**YES/ NO**	**YES/ NO**	**Belonging, Social Justice, Participation,**
	Meso			

	Macro			**Worth, Acceptance/ Rejection**

Micro-level interventions

This research demonstrated the importance of interpersonal relationships for young people which centred around belonging with family and belonging with friends or friendship groups. Interventions at this level support social cohesion through addressing interpersonal competence. This could be programs that address, social and emotional learning, self-confidence and self-efficacy. At the same time, access is also important, which can be facilitated through the provision of opportunities for young people to make friends. This could be through recreational programs, sport, family support services that assist families to work through differences or to stay together.

Some of the young people in this study were clear on the potential dangers of their need to belong. This very strong need to belong meant some young people were willing to change themselves to fit in and sometimes involved engaging in risky behaviour. There is room for stronger policy that supports the development of the social self in adolescents in a systematic way. Organisations can examine how they address this critical aspect of adolescent social cohesion in their programs. Therefore, at a micro-level, social cohesion is supported at the primary level of belonging and interpersonal skills.

Meso – level interventions

Many social cohesion programs led by civil society fall within this category.

Civic organisations can also lead the co-creation of spaces for young people, with young people. The research demonstrated that young people are keen to participate in their local area and in matters that affect them. Adults are the facilitators of access to opportunities for

young people to participate in meaningful ways. The thesis discussed the different forms participation can take. It is important that civic organisations are careful to keep moving up Hart's ladder to ensure that young people are active in creation and decision making for issues that affect them.

Young people in the study spoke about the lack of opportunities to facilitate understanding of diversity. In the past, social cohesion interventions have sought to do this through sport, the arts or recreational programs that provided individuals from different backgrounds to interact and "make the unknown known". In a community like Mt Druitt, access to these opportunities can be impacted by economic factors. Sporting programs are not free. Young people wanting to participate in sport are reliant on parents being able to afford the fees and the uniforms for sporting clubs. Policy level interventions can look at how to support community sport in marginalised areas.

Macro – level interventions

The police in community

It was clear from the conversations with research participants that most of them found the police to be unapproachable, frightening and discriminatory. The participants' experiences with police had been negative or they already held negative perceptions of police and all interactions were seen through this lens. The observed discriminatory practices of the police contributed to this. Young people in the study spoke of how groups of darker skinned young people were always watched and targeted. There is opportunity for the police to work closer in community. The current risk averse, reactive and punitive approaches limit the ability to create understanding between the police and young people growing up in marginalised areas. Police presence is associated with danger rather than safety in the minds of this group of

marginalised young people. In the past, the Mt Druitt Police funded community engagement officers as well as police/community liaison officers. These roles that included civilians and serving officers have largely disappeared. To improve the relationship between police and young people, police need to work with communities and community organisations to support programs that allow for interaction between young people and police. However, programmatic presence is not the only solution. Community oriented policing (Kocak, 2018) is an approach that has been beneficial and used around the world to support police interactions with the population. Australia, as a democratic state with a robust, policy guided police force, is well placed to support the implementation of community-oriented policing as an approach. While Mt Druitt has been one of the most highly policed areas in New South Wales, it also has many civil society organisations that work with community that can help to support a community policing approach. Young people growing up in Mt Druitt are already forming negative perceptions of police that can persist into adulthood. From a social cohesion perspective, trust in institutions is being eroded if this is not addressed.

Young people in the study also spoke about adult behaviour and how that impacts their feelings of safety. They spoke of fights in the streets and in the parks as well as drug taking behaviour. Community oriented policing models encourage foot patrols so police officers are more visible in community and also able to converse with community members as they walk the streets. These models have been shown to improve the feeling of safety in the neighbourhood. They also allow police officers to know residence by name and to quickly develop an understanding of the community that are working in. Rather than “watching the group of dark-skinned young men” as spoken of by the participants, police would be able to approach the young people and get to know them allowing the young men to feel safe in their own neighbourhoods. Participants like Roy spoke of how young people in the neighbourhood

are trying to do good. Through policing policy, there is opportunity to support young people's efforts and to minimise the negative behaviours around them.

The current New South Wales Parliamentary Secretary for Police and Counter-terrorism, is the member for Mt Druitt, Hon Edmond Attalla MP. With a well-resourced and inclusively implemented strategy that comprises the voices of police bureaucrats, police officers on the ground and community representatives, Mt Druitt could provide a pilot for community-oriented policing.

Flowers opposite the courthouse - the look and infrastructure of places

The environment around Mt Druitt was of great concern to the young people in the study. Their individual and collective efforts to make their local park better are yielding fruit. The Blacktown City Council agreed for lights to be placed in the park. In June 2025, the federal local member Hon. Ed Husic MP announced a five million investment into Bidwill Reserve. This is good news for the community. There is space for small visible changes to occur that support young people's perception of change in their community. The repair and upkeep of local parks is critical. Young people also spoke about having no places that they could interact with their friends safely or places they could go to build friendships and networks outside school. After dark initiatives like the one implemented at Fitzroy Crossing; the night place run by Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation; (ABC 14/05/2005) may provide safe guided spaces with adult facilitators. Local councils can take the lead to examine the places where young people can gather safely. This is true in both new and older suburbs.

Youth Councils and representative groups.

Marginalised young people are rarely chosen to participate as part of formal youth or young people's representative groups. The practice of participation is "often too formal, managerial and vague, too controlled by adults and committee formats, too top down and naïve about power, conflicting interests and the politics of how to manage and achieve change" (Alderson, 2008, p.85). When the life experience of the most marginalised young people in our communities are not included in "youth led" initiatives, we risk trivialising or altogether missing the reality of their day to day lives. Young people's exclusion can be exacerbated by institutional structures that inadvertently privledge a flawless record. For young people like the ones who participated in this study, their lack of representation becomes another way they are "othered"; another way in which they do not belong.

The younger participants in the research (13-year old's) valued the mentorship and the leadership of older children in the neighbourhood. They felt safer and more connected when older teenagers invited them to join in their game or kick a ball together. This offers an opportunity to grow social capital and to support older teenagers to be positive role models in the community. This is another way in which young people can be empowered to be agents of change in their neighbourhoods.

Literacy, Numeracy and Relationality

Young people in this study highlighted the importance of social and emotional learning to help them navigate family life, school yards, and friendships. Apart from literacy and numeracy, education curriculums need to recognise the importance of the social and emotional curriculum for the developing adolescent and prioritise this just as much in student learnings. Federal and State curriculums have the opportunity to add relationality as a whole

school and system approach from preschool to Year 12, and work towards literacy, numeracy and relationality priorities. A proactive social and emotional learning curriculum would benefit from a co-design approach to address the topics that young people identified in this research. The young people studied seek social connection and recognise it as important for their personal growth. They were also able to articulate their need for social and emotional learning and support. As part of this learning, young people recognised the impact that some of their friendship choices had on their development, the choices they made about how they engage with others, and how they engaged at school. Participants also asked for support to make friends, and how to recognise and leave harmful personal relationships. In discussing exclusion, participants highlighted the need to create opportunities for understanding different cultures, backgrounds and life experiences. There is an opportunity for an expanded understanding on how young people can be supported for better self-esteem and self-efficacy.

5.7 Limitations of The Study

There were limitations to this study. The first is that this was a purposive sample in one organisation in Mt Druitt. All young people who participated in this research attended a wellbeing program because they were at risk of disengagement from school and society. While this sample did provide a wealth of data relevant for marginalised young people, the views of young people from differing socioeconomic strata would help to deepen and extend the findings of future research on this topic. All the young people lived in Mt Druitt and surrounding suburbs and had similar life experiences. The similarity in life experience made the PAR process richer in showing understanding of issues relevant to the young people. Their geographical location also meant they could discuss actionable issues about familiar places. However, social cohesion is a social phenomenon that impacts all people. Based on a presentation of the thesis findings at the Strengthening Social Cohesion Conference on

October 29 and 30 2024, the Multicultural Youth Advocacy network (MYAN) has proposed a wider scope study on adolescent social cohesion.

This research was held between February and October of 2023 limiting the time interaction with young people. A longer study would have allowed time for participants to keep pursuing what they wanted to achieve within the study. The outcomes that occurred after the research period were possible because the Chain Reaction Foundation was committed to the findings of this project and to supporting the young people. This ongoing support is not always possible in research.

Though a variety of research methods was used, there is scope to open up the research methods with more creative research approaches for young people who are not comfortable in conversations/discussions. Both interviews and discussions groups required engagement in conversation and sometimes sharing in a group environment. Both the PhotoVoice and photo elicitation required the participants to explain why they had taken or chosen the picture or headline. For more reserved young people, other research methods that allowed for quiet reflection may have been beneficial, such as reflective journaling.

Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

One of the aims of this project is to present the research findings to policy makers. Strong recommendations on this are made below in 6.2. Before the conclusion and recommendations, a brief outline of action to November 2024 taken in response to the actions initiated by research participants is presented. This demonstrates the ongoing impact of the research and the value of conducting research in community. The conclusion stresses the two main findings from the research showing the importance of the interpersonal and structural in adolescent social cohesion. The recommendations follow, providing actionable suggestions that practioners and policy makers can engage with.

In Chapter 4, mention was made that lights have now been installed in Bidwill Reserve. Young people initiated this request and two research participants remained active in attending meetings with the Mayor and his representatives until the lights were installed. Another participant volunteered to help look after the Reserve between Council clean ups. This is a young person who had already had several encounters with police and was on a path to juvenile detention. They now feel able to contribute in meaningful ways to their community. This research cannot claim to being the sole inspiration as they were being supported in various ways, including being at the Learning Ground, however conversations during this research certainly opened up doors for them to contribute. They have also approached local organisations to volunteer and the Chain Reaction Foundation, the local schools, and other organisations in the area have ensured they have a trusted adult to support them.

Another participant made a presentation at a whole of school assembly on neurodiversity and the need for support for those with neurodiversity. They were proud to share their speech to the Learning Ground participants as well.

Another participant asked the Learning Ground facilitators if an excursion to the Penrith Bridge could be organised for their program group the majority of whom had not been part of the research excursion. They wanted to share their experience with others.

In 2024, 10 participants attended the Youth Social Cohesion Conference, an ancillary conference to the Strengthening Social Cohesion Conference organised by Youth Action, Western Sydney University, and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. They were able to share their ideas with other young people and spoke of their confidence discussing social cohesion because of their time spent on the project.

The research findings were presented at the Strengthening Social Cohesion Conference in 2024, and following that, interest has been expressed by Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) to further this research at a national level.

One of the aims of PAR are that the actions that come out of the research must be of benefit to the participants themselves. This cohort of participants has sought actionable solutions to their day to day experience and have demonstrated a willingness to work towards the common good, for themselves and their communities. The update above demonstrates the ongoing agency that the young people have to advance matters that concern them. Their increased confidence to speak in whole of school assemblies and also to be present for meetings with high ranking local government official and to volunteer for their community again speaks to this agency.

6.1 Conclusion

This research makes an important contribution to social cohesion discourse, facilitated by the voices and experiences of a cohort of marginalised young people living in one of the toughest areas in Australia. The findings offer two distinct components to adolescent social cohesion that have the capacity to influence how social cohesion is studied in future.

The first is ***that human development is an important part of social cohesion and this is supported by the centrality of interpersonal relationships making adolescence is an age of significance for societal cohesion.*** This development can be facilitated by a recognition of the importance of social and emotional learning and comprehensive education for social cohesion beginning with prioritising literacy, numeracy and ***relationality*** in education curriculums. This cohort of young people at risk of disengaging from school and society offered insights on the value of connection and learning about oneself as a protective factor against peer influences and isolation. The young people in this research spoke of their need for additional learning. Importantly, they could identify topics they wanted to explore and understand in greater depth.

The second is a recognition of the role that ***access plays in facilitating adolescent interaction with the world and hence social cohesion***. As a start, the adolescent voice must be included in the current annual conversation on social cohesion. Current measures that demonstrate young adults' discontent and fear of the future miss an important opportunity in adolescent years to prepare young people for the future. Adolescents demonstrated an orientation towards the common good in their desire to work together to look after their immediate environment. Their participation required a trusted adult to play a facilitating role and provide access for them to fulfil their plans. Access is also facilitated by the availability of safe spaces

for young people to interact that are provided through local government or civil society. Key actors in facilitating access for young people are family, civil society and institutions who play the role of trusted adults in young people's lives.

Through the theoretical framing of the study, it is evident adolescent social cohesion is greatly influenced by social structure. These young people had no influence on the structure of education and what constitutes good education. The rigidity of what curriculum dictates must be taught versus what young people feel they need to learn to survive in the world that they are growing up is an important area for further research. Adolescent participation is also impacted with young people not having access to opportunities to participate and lacking avenues to understand democracy as was evidenced by their not knowing what it was a government Minister did. The study also showed the importance of symbolic micro-interactions evidenced through every day relational practices found in the playground school and in community. These insights suggest that interventions should not just address structural barriers but also help young people to consider and reshape exclusionary norms within their peer environments.

This research also provided insights on the practice implications, both at policy level and for organisations and agencies working directly with the community and with young people. Inequities in infrastructure, engagement with authority, and support for at-risk populations are evident to young people and have an impact in how they engage with society as they grow.

This research has shown that adolescence is a period of importance to social cohesion and in building a society for the future. It also demonstrates that there are actionable ways to start engaging in conversations with this demographic about social cohesion.

6.2 Recommendations

Social Cohesion Scholarship

A criticism of social cohesion as a national concept is that many people do not know what it means (Lewis et al., 2019). This thesis articulates a framework for social cohesion that enables conversations about social cohesion to begin in adolescence. The proposed framework for adolescent social cohesion builds on Chan et al.'s (2006) framework on subjective and objective measures, as well as on vertical and horizontal interaction. The new framework adds the vertical institutional interaction and also the objective component of access both in the horizontal and vertical interactions. It also acknowledges power dynamics experienced by young people and their relationship with the world, primarily through institutions. As a result of this dynamic, cohesion within civil society which is horizontal in Chan et al.'s (2006) frame work, is a vertical relationship in the adolescent framework. This framework is supported by other scholars who have noted the roles that institutions play in social cohesion and who like Fonseca et. al, (2019) support closer examination of institutional roles.

This research also articulates two distinct components of adolescent social cohesion that would add to the academic knowledge in social cohesion studies. It also proposes statements that can be used to construct an instrument to measure adolescent social cohesion. Further research can look at validating this instrument and administering it to a larger cohort. The following eight recommendations challenge policy and practitioners at all levels of

government to review their policies through a social cohesion lens, as articulated by and derived from this group of marginalised young people.

1) *The adult as a facilitator for adolescent access*

This research has demonstrated that trusted adults play a key role in adolescent social cohesion. Policy makers and social services and community organisations need to identify and support this adult role proactively when enacting programs that seek to support young people's social cohesion. Youth-led initiatives when involving adolescents need to be actively supported by a facilitating adult and cannot operate in a vacuum. This finding has implications for how youth-led initiatives are funded to ensure success and continuity. Practioners that find themselves in the role of the trusted adult need mechanisms to ensure that their role is not compromised by opposing agendas.

2) *Harnessing shared intentionality for the common good.*

Young people in this study are prepared to take initiatives to better connect themselves to others and society. This includes being able to identify and voluntarily undertake work that they consider to be beneficial such as cleaning up their neighbourhood. They also desire local spaces to meet such as safe parks, and are willing to engage in the creation of these spaces. Their focus on their immediate environment provides policy makers and service providers with practical feedback on the usability of spaces and the challenges young people have in their day-to-day interactions with their local spaces. Young people seek connections that relate to their own lives – not those prescribed by others; and they demonstrate an ability to articulate how their proposed changes impact them. Young people can cooperate with each other and with adults and they demonstrate an intrinsic orientation towards the common good that can be nurtured.

Social services and community organisations should take these findings into consideration in their planning and design of services and projects. The research findings suggest engaging young people, including marginalised young people, as participants and even designers of social cohesion initiatives. Policy makers in government also should consider these findings. There is potential to engage young people in community projects and policy development utilising their voluntary resources and lived experience. Recognising and creating opportunities for young people who want to contribute can foster a sense of ownership over community spaces and their maintenance.

3) *Supporting the family as the primary source of connection*

Young people primarily find social connection within their family, among their close friends, and at school. However, many young people in this study lack social connection because of family break-ups, with many living in single-parent families, with grandparents, or under the supervision of carers. Many face alienations at school. There are implications here for policy approaches to supporting families and, within child protection, how families are supported to stay together, as well as communication for those young people who have been removed from the care of family or parents. In fact, that role of the trusted adult should be a consideration when a young person is removed from the care of a parent. Agencies need to identify the trusted adults that remain in a young person's life and support those relationships to continue. This support should not be reduced to tokenistic visits once a month.

4) *A human rights-based approach to education*

Young people indicated that school was not always a safe place and did not always provide the secure spaces and support they needed to learn. This was true for young people who were

neurologically diverse and those who struggled to find their place in a larger setting in school. There was a disconnect between topics young people felt they needed to learn and the school curriculum. Educators and policy makers need to consider these requests particularly in an evolving society where the challenges young people face are different from those of previous generations before the advent of global pandemics and technological advances. There is an opportunity to consider how a human rights-based approach to education to meet some of the challenges that young people highlighted in this research.

5) *Police Interaction and relationship building*

The young people in this project were able to discuss specific interactions with police and how often the interactions left them confused and afraid. There are implications here for police and their attitudes towards disconnected and marginalised young people as 'trouble makers', and the application of surveillance and punitive approaches. Police stop and search targets discussed earlier create an atmosphere of scrutiny for young people growing up in low socioeconomic environments, and as experts advise, become self-fulfilling prophesies. Police could support community projects that engage young people in activities that facilitate social cohesion and build trust so the police can be seen as trusted adults.

6) *The impact of online spaces*

Although already extensively researched and documented, this is an area of significance for adolescent social cohesion. While three participants identified online communities as places of belonging, for young people disconnected from their local school and community, online places can offer places to belong. While online spaces may offer a sense of belonging, the young people in question were still isolated in their immediate environment. Online spaces

can also be places of exclusion as is evidenced by the increase in online bullying and the government's push to ban social media for young people under 16 years of age.

7) *Belonging - Family, Friends, Community and Australia,*

In the last couple of years, the Mapping Social Cohesion Survey has found that the sense of belonging to Australia has declined. While the survey has included measures of belonging to community, there is a risk to social cohesion when belonging focuses on subjective sentiments in micro-environments. As was evident in Britain's focus on community cohesion in the early 2000s, there is a risk of "othering" communities that are experiencing structural inequities.

Belonging to Australia should remain part of the social cohesion conversation. However there has to be focused leadership at Federal and State levels through a department dedicated to social cohesion that can build on a focus on the common good, structural inequities, and drive an overarching agenda across all domains of social cohesion. The tensions emanating from the Israeli – Palestinian war have resulted in the government appointing Peter Khalil MP as Australia's first envoy for social cohesion in July 2024. While this is a positive move, there is still the troubling use of the term 'social cohesion' for political purposes aligned with immigration rather than the broader social cohesion agenda. Peter Khalil argues against this characterisation of social cohesion and urges the public to look broadly at the risks to social cohesion across all the social cohesion domains including socioeconomic inequality. A globalised and technologically connected world means that young people can access and engage in real time with events across the world and still remain isolated in their daily lives. Young people 18-25 still record the lowest rate of belonging in the Mapping Social Cohesion Survey. The experience of the young is the experience of the future, and this research showed

that young people are searching for real ways of belonging with their families, friends and community.

The Chain Reaction Foundation's Commitment to the findings

The Chain Reaction Foundation has committed to responding to the findings of this research, both in its programs and its advocacy for young people. This includes continued support for local young people who are advocating to Blacktown Council for infrastructure renewal and advocating for policy changes to State and Federal governments.

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Appendices

A1 Participant invitation and information sheets

Attention: UTS Human Research Ethics Committee

7 June 2022

To whom it may concern

On behalf of Chain Reaction Foundation (Chain Reaction), this letter confirms Chain Reaction's consent for doctoral student Rumbidzai Mabambe (Rumbi), under the supervision of Professor Jim Macnamara and Dr Amelia Johns, to undertake a Participatory Action Research study with participants at Mt Druitt Learning Ground, an initiative of Chain Reaction.

Chain Reaction was established to encourage the development of social cohesion and inclusion both locally and nationally. Chain Reaction exists to enhance the lives of disadvantaged young adolescents by addressing the challenges of increased disconnection and the need to create a sense of belonging within schools and communities. We established Learning Ground in Mount Druitt as an innovative, welcoming and safe space for young adolescents and their families.

We understand that the research Rumbi is undertaking, seeks to articulate a framework for social cohesion for adolescents from an adolescent perspective and that Participatory Action Research is a developmentally appropriate method for engaging with young people.

We consent for the investigation to involve:

1) Two Semi- structured interviews with 25- 30 participants aged 13 to 17 one at the beginning of the research and another towards the end. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.
2) 3 focus groups to be conducted over 4- 6-month period. The focus groups will be audio recorded and transcribed
3) Photovoice, where participants will take pictures of their environment to discuss with Rumbi in the second interview. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed.

The research will be conducted at Learning Ground on days that participants would normally be attending Learning Ground and Rumbi will liaise with our Team Leaders to schedule the research timetable. Initial contact for consent to participate in the research will be made by our Manager, Family Liaison in line with our policies for communication with families. Following the initial contact, Rumbi will follow up with the families for consent for their child to participate in the research.

We understand the research methodology has been designed to align with Chain Reaction policies and we support the use of a Participatory Action Research approach which aligns with our motto "Each One Teach One, which means we all can learn from each other. We also understand that the research aligns with the University of Technology Sydney's research guidelines for ethical conduct.

Sincerely

Production Note:

Signature removed prior to publication.

Margaret
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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
ETH22-7200 – CREATING A SOCIETY FOR THE FUTURE

WHO IS CONDUCTING THIS RESEARCH?

My name is Rumbidzai (Rumbi) Mabambe and I am the Executive Officer at Chain Reaction Foundation and a mentor at Learning Ground. I am conducting research for a PhD at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). My supervisor is Distinguished Professor Jim Macnamara, Telephone: (02) 9514 2334; Email: jim.macnamara@uts.edu.au

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

The purpose of this research is to find out what is important to young people in terms of society in the future and how they can be supported to grow in world where they feel they are connected, belong, and can succeed. I am collecting the views of young people, but their names will not be used. All information collected will be de-identified.

WHY HAS MY CHILD BEEN INVITED?

Your child has been invited to participate because they are aged between 13 and 17 and attend a program at the Mt Druitt Learning Ground.

Your contact details were obtained from the Mt Druitt Learning Ground.

WHAT DOES MY CHILD'S PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

- participate in two 15–20-minute semi-structured interviews and 3 focus groups that will be audio recorded and transcribed. The recording is for the data analysis and will be securely stored, Participants can listen to the recording after should they like to do so.
- 3 group discussions will be held over the course of the research (four months). Each discussion group will be one and a half hours and will be audio recorded and transcribed.
- During one week in the research, participants will be invited to take pictures of what they like in their environment. Participants will share the pictures they chose in the second interview and explain why they took them. Participants will be instructed to take pictures of things and not of people.

If you decide to allow your child to participate, they will be invited to participate in the interviews and discussion groups which will be conducted at Learning Ground during their Monday, Wednesday or Friday program. Interviews will be held at Learning Ground in a common room and other staff members close by.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

Yes, there are some risks/inconvenience. They are:

- Your child might feel uncomfortable speaking up in the interview or in front of others in the discussion groups
- Your child may be inconvenienced by the time required for PhotoVoice and may decide not to participate in or share their PhotoVoice photos

- In the unlikely event that your child shares something that shows they are at risk of significant harm, this will be communicated with the team leaders at Learning Ground who will contact you.

DOES MY CHILD HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you agree to allow your child to take part. If you decide not to allow your child to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or UTS or with the team at Learning Ground.

WHAT IF I WITHDRAW MY CHILD FROM THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

If you wish to withdraw your child from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting Rumbidzai.mabambe@student.uts.edu.au or calling .

However, it may not be possible to withdraw your child's data from the study results if these have already had their identifying details removed or have been incorporated in the analysis.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO INFORMATION ABOUT MY CHILD?

The research data (audio recording, transcribing, photos) will be stored on a password protected UTS database and all the data will be de-identified. The data may be used in future for related research.

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using personal information about your child for the research project. All this information will be treated confidentially. All information collected will be de-identified and stored at UTS and can be accessed by myself and my supervisors. Participants will decide what will happen to their PhotoVoice pictures which will also be de-identified.

We would like to store your child's information for future use in research projects that are an extension of this research project. In all instances, your child's information will be treated as confidential and stored securely.
It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that your child cannot be identified, except with your permission. Once the data is collected, it will be de-identified and will not be distinguishable from other participants data.

In accordance with relevant Australian and/or NSW Privacy laws, you have the right to request access to the information about your child that is collected and stored by the research team. You also have the right to request that any information with which you disagree be corrected. Please inform the research team member named at the end of this document if you would like to access your child's information.

The results of this research may also be shared through open access (public) scientific databases, including internet databases. This will enable other researchers to use the data to investigate other important research questions. Results shared in this way will always be de-identified by removing all personal information (e.g. name, address, date of birth etc.).

WHAT IF I HAVE ANY QUERIES OR CONCERNS?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact us on jim.macnamara@uts.edu.au or Rumbidzai.Mabambe@student.uts.edu.au

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

NOTE:
This study has been approved in line with the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC] guidelines. If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of the conduct of this research that you wish to raise independently of the research team, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph.: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au], and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any matter raised will be treated confidentially, investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
ETH22-7200 – CREATING A SOCIETY FOR THE FUTURE

WHO IS CONDUCTING THIS RESEARCH?

My name is Rumbidzai (Rumbi) Mabambe and I am the Executive Officer at Chain Reaction Foundation and a mentor at Learning Ground. I am conducting research for a PhD at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). My supervisor is Distinguished Professor Jim Macnamara, Telephone: (02) 9514 2334; Email: jim.macnamara@uts.edu.au

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

The purpose of this research is to find out what is important to young people in terms of society in the future and how young people can be supported to grow in world where they feel they are connected, belong, and can succeed. I am collecting the views of young people, but your names will not be used. All information collected will be de-identified.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED?

You have been invited to participate because they are aged between 13 and 17 and attend a program at the Mt Druitt Learning Ground. Being a young person yourself, you are an expert about what is important to young people

WHAT DOES MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

- participate in two 15–20-minute semi-structured interviews and 3 discussion groups that will be audio recorded and transcribed. The recording is for the data analysis and will be securely stored, you can listen to the recording after should they like to do so.
- 3 group discussions will be held over the course of the research (four months). Each discussion group will be 45 minutes to one hour and will be audio recorded and transcribed.
- During one week in the research, you will be invited to take pictures of what you like in your environment. You can then share the pictures you chose in the second interview and explain why you took them. You will be asked to take pictures of things or and places but not of people.

If you decide to participate, you will participate in the interviews and discussion groups which will be conducted at Learning Ground during Monday, Wednesday or Friday programs. Interviews will be held at Learning Ground in an area away from but in the same room as others and other staff members will be close by.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

Yes, there are some risks/inconvenience. They are:

- You might feel uncomfortable speaking up in the interview or in front of others in the discussion's groups

- You may be inconvenienced by the time required for PhotoVoice and may decide not to participate in or share your PhotoVoice photos
- In the unlikely event that you tell me something that shows you are at risk of significant harm, I will have to speak with the team leaders at Learning Ground.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you agree take part. If you decide not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or UTS or with the team at Learning Ground.

WHAT IF I WITHDRAW FROM THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting Rumbidzai.mabambe@student.uts.edu.au or calling .

However, it may not be possible to withdraw your data from the study results if these have already had their identifying details removed or have been incorporated in the analysis.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY INFORMATION?

The research data (audio recording, transcribing, photos) will be stored on a password protected UTS database and all the data will be de-identified. The data may be used in future for related research.

By signing the consent form you consent to the research team collecting and using personal information about you for the research project. All this information will be treated confidentially. All information collected will be de-identified and stored at UTS and can be accessed by myself and my supervisors. You will decide what will happen to their PhotoVoice pictures which will also be de-identified.

We would like to store your information for future use in research projects that are an extension of this research project. In all instances, your information will be treated as confidential and stored securely.
It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified, except with your permission and your parent's permission. Once the data is collected, it will be de-identified and will not be distinguishable from other participants data.

In accordance with relevant Australian and/or NSW Privacy laws, you have the right to request access to the information about you that is collected and stored by the research team. You also have the right to request that any information with which you disagree be corrected. Please inform the research team member named at the end of this document if you would like to access your information.

The results of this research may also be shared through open access (public) scientific databases, including internet databases. This will enable other researchers to use the data to investigate other important research questions. Results shared in this way will always be de-identified by removing all personal information (e.g. name, address, date of birth etc.).

WHAT IF I HAVE ANY QUERIES OR CONCERNS?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact us on jim.macnamara@uts.edu.au or Rumbidzai.Mabambe@student.uts.edu.au

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

NOTE:
This study has been approved in line with the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC] guidelines. If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of the conduct of this research that you wish to raise independently of the research team, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph.: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au], and quote the UTS HREC reference number ETH22-7200. Any matter raised will be treated confidentially, investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

VERBAL CONSENT SCRIPT

ETH22-7200 – CREATING A SOCIETY FOR THE FUTURE

Interview no:	
Date:	
Time:	
Interviewer:	

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today about what is important to young people in terms of society in the future and how young people can be supported to grow in world where they feel they belong, are connected and can succeed. If you feel that you would rather not go on with the interview that is fine too.

Thank you. Now I just need to confirm some information about you, and I'm going to start audio recording. This will help us to accurately record your answers, but all this information will remain completely confidential. Is that OK?

First, I need to ask you some questions to confirm that you consent to participating. Remember, even after you've answered these questions, you can withdraw your consent at any time during the interview. However, it may not be possible to withdraw your data from the study results if these have already had your identifying details removed.

The consent questions are:

Question	Yes	No
Have you read the information contained in the participant information sheet or had it read to you in a language that you understand?		
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and are you satisfied with the answers you have received?		
Do you understand that there may be risks? - You might feel uncomfortable speaking up in the interview or in front of others when we are in the focus groups - You may be inconvenienced by the time required for PhotoVoice and may decide not to participate in or share their PhotoVoice photos - In the unlikely event that you tell me something that shows you are at risk of significant harm, I will have to speak with the team leaders at Learning Ground.		

Do you understand that the research will produce reports, academic work, articles and a book – but without your name included?		
Do you freely agree to participate in this activity, with the understanding that you may withdraw at any time?		
Do you agree to having this interview audio recorded and transcribed?		

(If answered NO to any of these – clarify and/or discontinue interview)

If you have any concerns about the research you can contact rumbidzai.mabambe@student.uts.edu.au

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772 or Research.ethics@uts.edu.au and quote this number **ETH22-7200**

If the participant provides verbal consent;

Interview no. _____ read the verbal consent script (or had it read to them) and agreed to participate on date: time:

A2 Interview and discussion group guides

Creating a Society for the Future

A Framework for Adolescent Social Cohesion

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Today we will talk about how people in our community and our country can work together so that we can feel that we are connected to each other and our community and that we can trust each other. That our world can be a place where every young person can be connected in a meaningful way to others. We can think of connection as

> That which enables a young person to participate or contribute in a meaningful way with others who share the space they inhabit (neighbourhood, community, country) and have a sense of belonging. It is that connection that enables us to build communities where people have and experience the same rights and opportunities in life no matter their gender, race, culture or how much money they have.

We will go through some questions together and you can ask me some questions too if you want to.

1. What does connection mean to you
2. What do you think young people need to become connected?
3. If I was a stranger coming in from another country, which places or from which people could I learn whether or not a teenager is being supported to have connection with others? What type of information would they give me.
4. How would you know you are connected to others?

Our community can have an impact on whether or not we feel we are connected to others. Our community can mean different things. It can be our school community, neighbourhood, family connections, our local shops etc.

What does community mean to you

Please complete these sentences for me

- In my community I like……..
- In my community I do not like……..
- In my community I wish……

- In my school I like……..
- In my school I do not like……..

- In my school I wish……

- In Australia I like……
- In Australia I do not like…….
- In Australia I wish……...

Discussion Group One

We are going to spend some time together talking about how we can build a world that allows young people to become their best selves. We want this room to be a place where everyone can feel respected, valued, listened to and not criticised and we want to continue that now in the research. Together we want to work on how we can create a society for the future and you as young people who will live in that future can help to create that future.

In our interviews we looked at what it means for each of us to have connection and we looked at what we liked, did not like and wished for in our community. This is a summary of what I heard. Did I get it right?

We will discuss some of the things that adults today use to measure our connection and we will ask ourselves if that matters to young people.

Does it matter to me;

1. **Belonging:** Does it matter to young people whether or not they belong? What does belonging look like to you? Where do you belong? Does it matter whether we feel we belong to Australia? What other places or groups can we belong to?

2. **Worth:** Does it matter to young people whether or not they are happy or have self-worth? What does that look like to you?

3. **Social justice and equity:** Does it matter to young people whether or not others have enough money or enough to eat? What about whether or not others can get jobs or who gets to get a job? Does it matter who is in charge of the government? Does it make a real difference?
4. **Participation:** Are there ways young people can help others in society? Does it matter if they do help or do not?

5. **Acceptance and rejection, legitimacy:** Does it matter where young people come from or what their ethnic background or religion is? Would it affect how they are treated in Australia.

Community mapping

Using the butcher's paper, lets show the places in our area (Mt Druitt and surrounding suburbs) that support young people to be their best selves.

1. What is missing in our community that should be there?

Discussion Group Two

1. Let's imagine you were Young Australian of the Year. What would you want people to know to make sure young people are supported to have connection?
2. Who could help you in making sure your suggestions really happened?

Elicitation Exercise

let's take a look at the newspapers. Take your time to go through them and find pictures or headlines that you want to include in things that are important for a young person to have connection.

PhotoVoice explanation and trial with co-researchers

PhotoVoice or journal-take pictures of things in your community that you think are impacting connection and you want to talk about them.

Interview Two

Tell me about your pictures.

1. Have they made you think about other things that help a young person become the best they can be?
2. What would you like to do with your pictures at the end of the research project?
3. Is there anything else you think we should include in our conversation about young people and connection/social cohesion?

(each interview is 15-20 minutes)

Discussion Group Three

Here is a summary of what we have put together so far in our framework for supporting young people.

1. Is there anything else we should include?
2. Do you think this something we can put online? If we were to put this online where would it be?

A3 Distress protocol for participants and Researchers

Distress Protocol for Participants and Researchers

The following document outlines the Distress protocol for participants in the project 'Building a Society for the Future', and includes a safety protocol for the researcher. These protocols will be used during the research both in the interviews and the discussion groups to be conducted at the Mt Druitt Learning Ground.

When invited to participate in the research, all participants will be informed of the nature of the research activities and any potential risks. This information will be provided as a written information sheet and can also be read to them should they prefer. Parents and guardians will also be given the same information and parental consent will be sought before asking young people to participate. Prior to the first interview, participants will be invited to give verbal consent. And will have an opportunity to ask questions should they wish to do so.

Participants will also be reminded that they can pause, terminate, or withdraw from the research at any stage should they wish to do so.

This protocol has been developed with reference to the UTS HREC Distress Protocol Guidelines as well as Chain Reaction's procedures for prevention and de-escalation of risk situations for participants and staff and Child Safety Code of Conduct.

Supporting Participants exhibiting signs of distress:

The researcher will monitor participants at all times for signs of distress. This includes, but is not limited to: evident unease shown through facial expressions, the participant saying they are no longer comfortable continuing or other body language including crying, moving away, shaking/shivering. Should the researcher observe these signs, they will:

- **Pause the research activity**. Enquire about the participant's wellbeing and use Learning Ground's policies on child safety and de-escalation including emotion coaching to address an emotional response. Enquire if the participant would like to pause the activity or to discontinue the activity.
- **In case of mild discomfort**: should the participant request a break, or to terminate the activity entirely, this will be carried out immediately. In a discussion groups, the discussion group will be stopped and the participant given an opportunity to leave the room. In an interview, the interview will be stopped and the participant can leave the room. The researcher will call on the support of the Learning Ground Team leaders to support the participant in each case.
- **In the case of extreme distress**; such as excessive crying, the activity will be immediately suspended and the researcher will ask the Learning Ground Team Leader to support the young person. Learning Ground policies will be followed in informing the parents/guardians. The researcher will also provide the participant with the contact details for counselling/support services (listed at the end of the document).
- If distress occurs in a discussion group, the researcher will resume the discussion with the other participants as appropriate.

- The researcher will immediately advise their supervisor, Distinguished Professor Jim Macnamara, on the day of the event.

Participant disclosure of victimisation:

Participants are informed when volunteering to participate in the research that disclosures that show they are at risk of significant harm will need to be reported.

If a disclosure of victimisation is made;

1. The researcher will immediately halt the activity, and ascertain whether the participant:
    a. is at risk of significant harm
    b. If the participant has previously disclosed this information to anyone.
2. The researcher will advise the participant that they are required to report this incident to the Chain Reaction CEO. Chain Reaction's policies on Child Safety will be followed.
    a. If the participant is currently in danger or has not previously disclosed this information, the researcher will identify the participant to Chain Reaction Foundation's CEO to ensure their safety.
    b. It is possible that a participant who discloses this information may not wish to be identified. This may be because the participant has previously disclosed this information to parents/guardians and received support. However, the researcher will advise the participant that they are required to inform the Chain Reaction CEO of the disclosure as per Chain Reaction Policy.
3. Depending on the wellbeing and preference of the participant and Chain Reaction, the research activity may be resumed, rescheduled, or terminated.
4. The researcher will write a report of the incident to submit to their supervisor and UTS Ethics, documenting the disclosure and actions taken.

Safety Protocol for Researcher
The researcher will advise her supervisor, Distinguished Professor Jim Macnamara should she become distressed during the conduct of the research and (if necessary) contact UTS Counselling services or their own support services. To mitigate this, the researcher will stay in regular contact with both supervisors Distinguished Professor Jim Macnamara and Dr Amelia Johns through regular meetings and communications (email and phone).

Helplines

These helplines will be kept on-hand by the researcher, should a participant unexpectedly become distressed or disclose a status of victimisation.

Lifeline – www.lifeline.org.au 13 11 14
A 24/7 confidential crisis support service that also has online components.
Kids Helpline – www.kidshelpline.com.au 1800 55 1800
Free, 24/7 confidential support and counselling telephone service for young people, with an online component.