

The advantaged and disadvantaged of remote schools

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Abstract

This presentation (and the accompanying paper) will explore the construct of disadvantage and advantage in remote schools. It is based on qualitative findings from the CRC-REP's Remote Education Systems (RES) project.

'Indigenous disadvantage' is often discussed in the media and politically axiomatically, as if it were a universal and absolute truism. Educational disadvantage in remote contexts is often discussed alongside phrases such as 'poor attendance' and 'academic failure'. The language used to describe the experience and outcomes of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is replete with descriptions of deficits. The RES research team has spent the last three years gathering data from remote education stakeholders across remote parts of Australia. In particular the project sought the views of local people living in remote Aboriginal communities, what they thought education is for and what success looks like. The results show a picture of success and purpose that sometimes differs depending on respondents' positions as locals or non-locals.

Given the largely unsuccessful attempts of non-Indigenous stakeholders to improve attendance and outcomes, retention rates and transitions to employment, it may be that within the context of remote communities, it is the non-local who is disadvantaged. Further, responses from remote stakeholders do not present themselves as being disadvantaged. Rather, the data shows that the three main purposes of education (whether it be at school or outside) are about supporting language, land and culture; about ensuring young people know who they are and where they belong; and about young people being 'strong in both worlds' (the world in community and the world outside). Many non-local school leaders and teachers express their own inability (disadvantage) when responding to these imperatives for a successful education.

Some implications of these findings will be discussed during the presentation and there will opportunity for participants to ask questions and challenge the conclusions afterwards.

Bio

John Guenther is the Principal Research Leader for the Remote Education Systems project with the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation and Flinders University. John has worked as a researcher and evaluator in remote Australian contexts—particularly the Northern Territory—for the last 12 years on issues related to education, training, families and children, justice, child protection and domestic violence. His current role is focused on understanding how education systems can better respond to the needs of students and families living in very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The advantaged and disadvantaged of very remote schools

Remote Education Systems project



Introduction

This is the second in a series of lectures based on findings from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems (RES) project. The RES team's intent in offering these lectures is to inform our key stakeholders so the findings can be turned into something useable and also influence the way people think and respond to remote education, particularly for those students who come from remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The focus of today's lecture is on educational disadvantage. When 'we'—those who come from a western experience and position—talk about educational disadvantage it is sometimes assumed to be a given in remote contexts. What this lecture will do is challenge those assumptions and expose the basis of our beliefs about what it means to be advantaged or disadvantaged.

Along the way I'll share *some* of our many research findings as they relate to this particular topic. At the end I want to get to a position that allows us to consider just who is disadvantaged in remote education. This will probably leave a lot of questions hanging about how schools respond, but I think I'll leave that discussion to a separate lecture.

RES project Aim

- To find out how remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can get the best benefit from the teaching and learning happening in and out of schools.

Research questions

- What is education for and what can/should it achieve?
- What defines 'success' from the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
- How does teaching need to change to achieve 'success'?
- What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?



Remote Education Systems project background

Four research questions (RQs) underpin the RES research. Qualitative data collected from all sources has been examined for responses to these questions. I will touch on each of these questions throughout the lecture. I should also point out that while overall, our research is concerned about Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander standpoints, in this presentation the qualitative sources we have used, to the best of our knowledge, have not included Torres Strait Islanders.

RQ1	What is education for in remote Australia and what can/should it achieve?
RQ2	What defines 'successful' educational outcomes from the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
RQ3	How does teaching need to change in order to achieve 'success' as defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
RQ4	What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?

Our methodology and data sources

Our methodology is built on assumptions that in the complex and contested space of work in remote Indigenous communities, research should

1. Reflect the primacy of local ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies;
2. Acknowledge the power and position dynamics of outsiders working inside remote communities;
3. Recognise the humanity shared between researchers and researched;
4. Co-generate new knowledge that is not necessarily black nor white; and
5. Be transformative and powerful for those we work with.

RES Project data sources



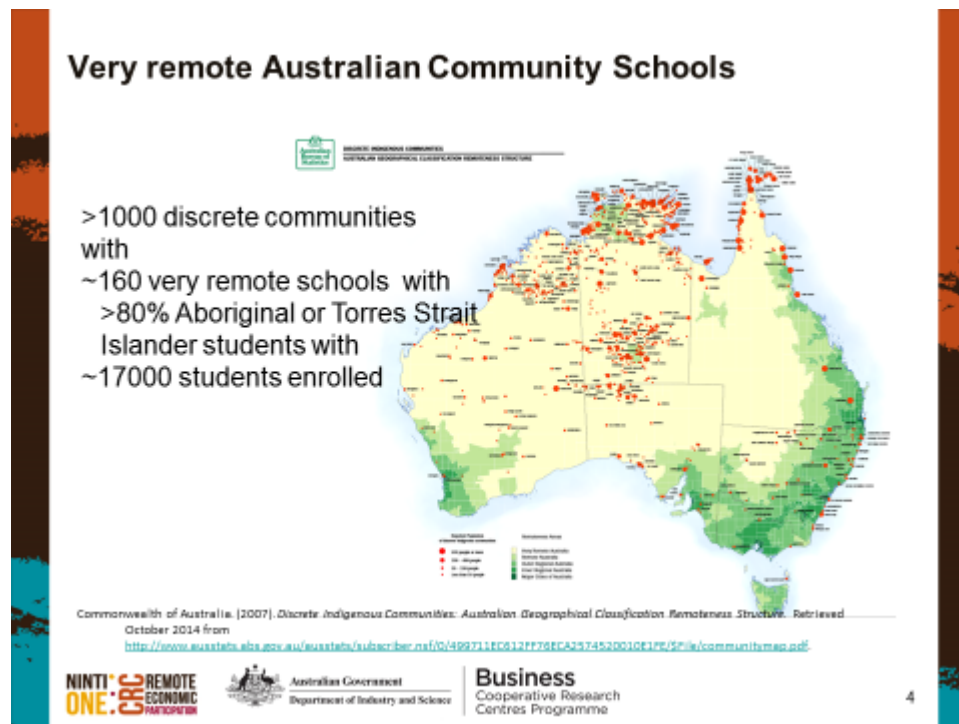
- Publicly available datasets (my school and Census)
- Community surveys in 10 remote communities
- Observations from site visits in 3 jurisdictions (WA, SA, NT)
- Engagement of over 200 remote education stakeholders in research processes (20 Thinking Outside The Tank sessions)
- Dare to Lead Snapshots in 31 Very Remote schools
- Reading of the relevant research literature
- 6 Post-graduate research projects in progress



Our research draws on both qualitative and quantitative sources. These include:

- Publicly available datasets (my school and Census);
- Community surveys in 10 remote communities;
- Observations from site visits in 3 jurisdictions (WA, SA, NT);
- Engagement of over 200 remote education stakeholders in formal qualitative research processes (20 Thinking Outside The Tank sessions);
- Dare to Lead Snapshots in 31 Very Remote schools ; and
- Reading of the relevant research literature
- 6 post-grad research projects covering topics related to boarding schools, technology, SACE completions, culturally inclusive curriculum, school readiness and health and wellbeing.

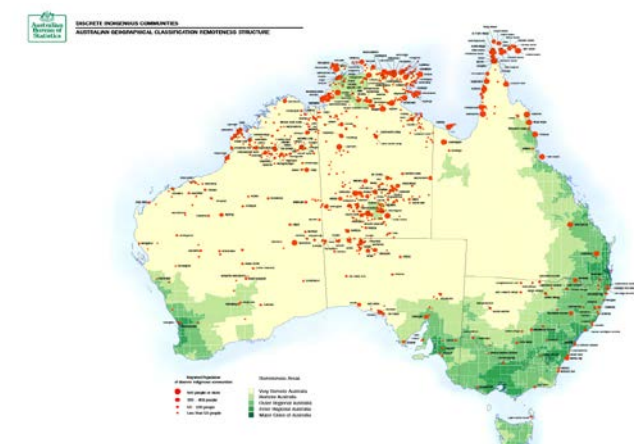
The qualitative data I refer to in this lecture comes from community surveys, observations, thinking outside the tank sessions and the *Dare To Lead* Collegial Snapshots.



Remote communities in northern Australia

Before I discuss some of the relevant literature, it may be useful first to understand the context I am talking about. There are hundreds of communities dotted around northern Australia. The map shows their geographical locations. All of the light yellow region is considered, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to be 'very remote'. What the figure doesn't show is the diversity the red dots represent. There are dozens of languages spoken in these places. The country, which belongs to people is extraordinary and the cultures of the peoples of these communities are rich, ancient and quite different to the cultures that are represented in non-remote parts of Australia. For people living on their country, the capital cities are remote.

Figure 1. Discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities in northern Australia



Source: (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002)

How is disadvantage defined and described?

- Disparity and gaps (Bath 2011, Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011)
- Black and white binaries of deficit
 - Is being Indigenous a disadvantage? (Cowlshaw 2012)
 - Based on non-Indigenous understandings of advantage: Aboriginal=problem (Gorringe 2011)
 - Racialization leads to exceptionalism (Langton 2012)
 - Idealises the interests of the privileged and reinforces hegemony (Orlowski 2011)
 - Homogenises all Indigenous peoples (Rowse 2010)

How is disadvantaged defined and described in the literature?

Before I share some of our research findings I'd like to briefly outline some of the literature of relevance. I'll start with a summary of how disadvantage is described or represented, not from a theoretical perspective, but largely from the perspectives of those who articulate views about disadvantage, perhaps uncritically. I am resisting the urge to make comment on this from any number of theoretical or philosophical approaches, though I acknowledge that holding a particular theoretical or philosophical position does shape to some extent how we might respond to concepts of disadvantage, deficits and gaps.

Here, I don't want to single out particular groups. Rather I'd just suggest that many commentators (including many academics) on remote education take the concept of 'disadvantage' as a given, not as something that can or should be thought through. I'll talk a little about the policy response to this disadvantage before briefly unpacking what the foundations of educational advantage in Australia are.

Disparity and gaps

One of the predominant themes that pervades much of the literature on remote education is one about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'disadvantage'. The intent of the word is perhaps to convey a sense of the 'disparity' (Bath, 2011) between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people on a range of indicators (see for example Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011a). It has been defined specifically as 'The difference (or gap) in outcomes for Indigenous Australians when compared with non-Indigenous Australians' (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2012, p. xiv). The concept then extends to 'closing the gap' (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) in a general sense and in a more specific educational context (What Works: The Work Program, 2012). Educational disadvantage is one of several domains where disadvantage occurs. I think it is important to note that this talk of

closing gaps is not unique to Australia. It occurs in other countries where minorities exist, and not just indigenous minorities.

Black and white binaries of deficit

There can and should be no denial of the data and their practical consequences that are behind these labels, but there are problems with the pervasive rhetoric of disadvantage. *First* there is a real risk that being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander *is* the disadvantage—in effect a racial or ‘cultural dysfunction’ (Cowlshaw, 2012, p. 412). *Second*, the deficit discourse is most frequently based on non-Indigenous understandings of advantage, developing a sense of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ (Gorringe, 2011). *Third*, the racialized nature of disadvantage may lead to a promulgation of responses that lead to ‘exceptionalism’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the basis of race (Langton, 2012)—that is, an exceptionalist view that comes with race categorisations segregates and therefore discriminates against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. *Fourth*, the disadvantage discourse may idealise the interests of the privileged, reinforcing a hegemony that in turn reinforces existing power dynamics in society and results in ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’ of the disadvantaged (Orlowski, 2011, p. 43). The design of remedial interventions which are meant to fix the deficits of course then just reinforce a narrow view of what a good education is really for.

Furthermore, the stereotyping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a homogenous ‘Indigenous’ population, rather than a diverse mix of peoples (see Rowse, 2012) tends to result in false binaries along racial lines: Indigenous versus non-Indigenous. In the process indicators used to describe culture end up describing disparity rather than aspects that are considered of value within the culture being described (Rowse, 2010). I’d be happy to give examples of these later.

Interventions designed to address remote educational disadvantage

The data reported at a national level in Australia, do support a view that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders perform below the standards achieved by non-remote students. The performance gap or deficit, is evident in any number of measures including academic achievement (as measured by NAPLAN), school attendance, retention to Year 12 and transition into further education and training or employment (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011). National approaches do not necessarily target remote schools but the schools with the most ‘disadvantage’ according to these measures, tend to be those schools in remote places, and more specifically those schools which have high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Addressing disadvantage: National Education Agreement 2012

- a) attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and school leaders... **[national professional standards]**;
- b) implement a **national curriculum**;
- c) transparent and strengthened accountability... **[myschool.edu.au]**
- d) raise parental and community expectations of educational outcomes;
- e) support teaching and learning in schools through appropriate infrastructure;
- f) review funding and regulation across Government and non-government schooling sectors **[Australian Education Act 2013]**;
- g) providing support to students with additional needs; and
- h) "Closing the Gap" in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. **[Stronger futures in the NT]**

(Standing Council on Federal Financial Relations, 2012, p 11)

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But bearing this in mind, the 2012 *National Education Agreement* signalled a commitment to reform education to address disadvantage.

(a) attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and school leaders and support schools working with their local community; (b) implement a national curriculum; (c) transparent and strengthened accountability to improve student and school performance, including through national reporting on individual schools and the improved collection of and access to nationally consistent data and information required to support the agreed outcomes; (d) raise parental and community expectations of educational outcomes; (e) support teaching and learning in schools through appropriate infrastructure; (f) review funding and regulation across Government and non-government schooling sectors; (g) providing support to students with additional needs; and (h) "Closing the Gap" in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

(Standing Council on Federal Financial Relations, 2012, p 12)

The results of 'A Commitment to Action'



- National Partnership Agreements [\$~17bn worth]
- My School
- National Curriculum
- Gonski reforms
- Teacher professional standards
- School Enrolment and Attendance Measure
- More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative
- National Alliance for Remote Indigenous Schools
- Direct Instruction and Explicit Direct Instruction
- The Stronger Smarter Institute
- Australian Indigenous Education Foundation
- Remote School Attendance Strategy

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It doesn't take too much to recognise the outworking of the National Education Agreement. But the question for me is: 'have these policies and interventions made a difference?'. The National Education Agreement was built on the foundation of the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. The *Melbourne Declaration* came with a 'commitment to action' to address a number of key priorities including improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. And indeed there has been plenty of action.

- National Partnership Agreement on Low Socio-economic Status School Communities (\$1107m over 5 years to 2013)
- National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality (\$444m over 5 years to 2013)
- National Partnership Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy (\$500m over 5 years to 2013)
- Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory National Partnership Agreement (\$184 over 4 years for 'enhancing education' to 2013)
- National Partnership Agreement on Improving Literacy and Numeracy (\$242m over 2 years to 2013)
- National Partnership Agreement on the Nation Building and Jobs Plan: Building Prosperity for the Future and supporting jobs now (\$14000m under Building the Education Revolution over 3 years to 2011)
- Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory (\$583m over 10 years from 2012)

These initiatives have been complemented by other programs with varying degrees of connection with remote education. They included:

- The National Alliance for Remote Indigenous Schools (NARIS) [now concluded]
- The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Initiative (MATSI) [due to end this year]
- Direct Instruction and Explicit Direct Instruction through the Australian Government's *Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary School's Programme* [announced this year]
- The School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM)

- The Stronger Smarter Institute
- Cape York Partnerships (incorporating a range of activities including Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy and the Family Responsibilities Commission).
- In December 2013, the Australian Government announced its Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS).

Most of these initiatives have come and gone. But I ask ‘did they work?’ It is actually quite difficult to find anything that answers these questions, which is perhaps surprising given the billions of dollars invested. And of course, these programs I have listed here are just the federally funded initiatives. There are countless other initiatives that work at one level or another to support the Melbourne Declaration’s ‘Commitment to Action’.

Rationales for an advantaged education

- Sociological and societal (e.g. Dewey 1938, Friere 1970, Bourdieu 1983, Oakes et al 2013)
- Developmental (e.g. Hanushek and Woessman 2007, Field et al 2007, Leadbeater 2012)
- Knowledge and skills (e.g. Robertson 2009, Siegel 2010)
- Individual and economic (e.g. Smith 1904, Becker 1964, Portelli and Menashi 2010)
- Historical (e.g. Campbell and Proctor 2014)



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Foundations of an advantaged education in Australia

It may be worth stopping for a moment to consider where our ideas of an advantaged education come from. I won’t cover this in any depth here, but you can read about it in some of our published work on this topic. For now I’ll just suggest that there are five major rationales that drive an advantaged education in Australia.

There is a sociological and societal rationale for education. Education has been seen as a vehicle for social control (Dewey, 1938; Payne, 1927) and for the promotion of citizenship (Gutmann, 2009; McCowan, 2010). This kind of socialising role of education may have the tendency to ignore what Luis Moll has described as minority groups’ ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al., 2009). However, others have described education as transformative and emancipatory (Friere, 1970; Oakes et al., 2013). Education too, is seen as a process that builds ‘social capital’ (Coleman, 1988) and is a product of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1983) which in turn maintains class divisions (Reay, 2010).

There is a developmental rationale for education. The international discourse around education and development suggests that education leads to increased levels of development (Hanushek &

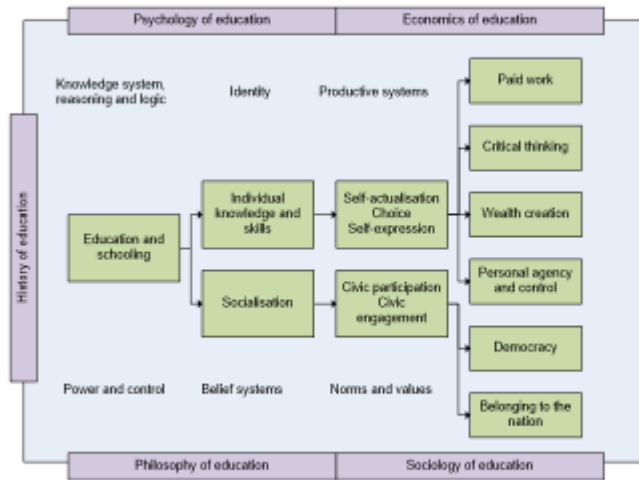
Woessmann, 2007; Keeley, 2007; OECD, 2012a), and social equity (Field et al., 2007; OECD, 2012b). The hope of education is that it leads to a better life, particularly for those living on the margins of society. Leadbeater (2012, p 23) suggests that education 'offers them a hope that their place in society will not be fixed by the place they were born' and that through education people can 'remake their lives'. Of course, for those whose identity is largely shaped by the place they were born, it may raise questions about why you would want to remake your life.

There is a knowledge and skills rationale for education. There is a view that knowledge is an end in itself, that one of the primary aims of education is epistemic (Robertson, 2009), that for educators it is reasonable to expect that it is 'possible, and desirable for people to *know and do* things, and to engage in and take seriously the fruits of *rational inquiry*, where such inquiry is understood to involve the pursuit of *truth*' (Siegel, 2010, p 283).

There is an individual and economic rationale for education. The argument of liberalist education philosophers suggests that 'schools should encourage competition between individual students and prepare students to live independent lives in society, respecting their uniqueness and distinct capabilities' (Portelli & Menashy, 2010, p 421). Individualism is also reflected in the economic theories of Adam Smith (1904) which in turn is reflected in what could be described as free market capitalism. Gary Becker's (1964) work on *Human Capital* brought together ideas of return on investment in education and distribution of income on the basis of educational attainment.

There is also an historical basis for education. Current models of education are not that far removed from those of the nineteenth century. An examination of the history of Australian schooling by Campbell and Proctor (2014) reveals a number of features that have changed only a little since the mid-nineteenth century. It is true, the breadth of education and schooling has expanded, but the fundamentals of teachers teaching students in classrooms hasn't. Between 1872 and 1893 all the Australian colonies had departments of education, by 1900 school attendance was compulsory, the teaching profession was well established, and curricula were well developed. The same cannot be said for education in many remote communities. In many cases, the communities were not established till the 1960s, 70s or 80s. And school buildings were not necessarily a part of the community's landscape till later on. Our analysis of community level data suggests that the longer the history of schooling in a community, the more likely patterns of attendance and achievement will mirror those of non-remote schools (Guenther et al., 2014).

And the outworking of these rationales...



Adapted from Guenther, J., Bat, M., & Osborne, S. (2013). Red dirtthinking on educational disadvantage. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 100-110. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.18

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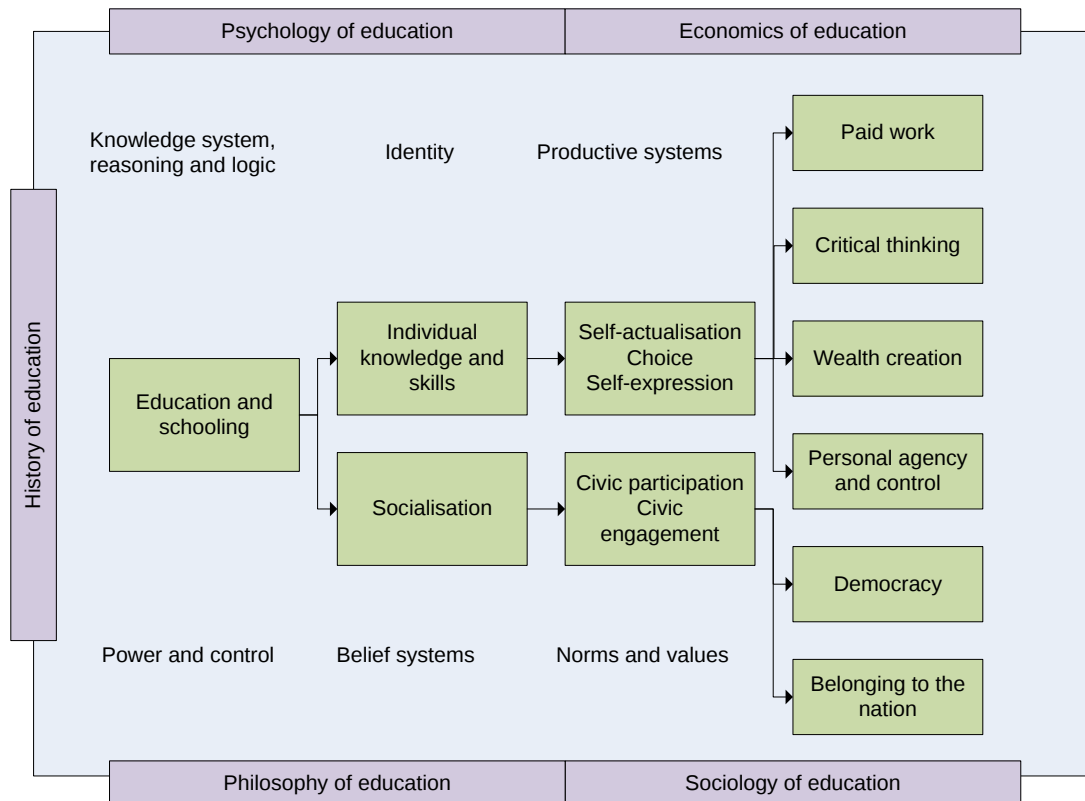
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We could represent the outworking of these rationales like this.

Figure 2. A construction of Australian educational advantage



Adapted from (Guenther et al., 2013)

The point is that the more your personal identity, values, beliefs, social norms, knowledge systems, economic systems and expectations of what is important, align with those of the system, the more

you will be likely to succeed in the system. Further, you may be disadvantaged by the system, if you want to succeed in the system, when your ways of being, knowing and valuing do not align. However, it may not be that simple as we shall see.

Is educational disadvantage a concern for remote education stakeholders?								
References	All Sources		All coding references*		Remote Aboriginal references*		Estimated number of unique participants~	
References to 'disadvantage'	4	4.6%	6	0.2%	0	0.0%	4	0.4%
System responses: reconciliation, equity, race and aboriginality	18	20.7%	50	1.4%	7	0.6%	30	2.9%
System responses: poverty and socio-economic status	9	10.3%	22	0.6%	0	0.0%	30	2.9%
Cross-cutting theme: context and complexity	35	42.5%	74	2.0%	14	1.2%	67	6.4%
Teaching to success: health and well being	22	25.3%	76	2.1%	36	3.2%	230	21.9%
Totals	87		3665		1126		1050	

Source: RES project data, qualitative analysis

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Is educational disadvantage a concern for remote education stakeholders?

In our examination of qualitative data from the various sources I mentioned earlier, we looked for clues that might show how respondents saw disadvantage. You'll see in this presentation of data that we have separated out those who provide a 'remote Aboriginal' voice from the rest. The reason we have done this is to ensure that we answer the questions we had about the remote Aboriginal standpoint.

The table on this slide summarises the number of sources, references and participants who discuss issues associated with 'disadvantage'. What the data shows is: 1) that 'disadvantage' hardly rates a mention as a term in itself, and among remote Aboriginal respondents, it does not rate at all; 2) When we look for related concepts such as poverty, discrimination, racism, access and equity, we can see that these concerns do prompt comments, predominantly from non-remote respondents and as a reaction to the need for a system response.

However, rather than talk about disadvantage in those terms, more respondents talked about the nature of the context and the complexity within it. Further, there was broad recognition in about one-quarter of all sources that the health and wellbeing of children both contributed to learning outcomes and need to be taken into consideration if teachers were going to teach successfully.

Table 1. Document sources and coding references

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Totals	87		3665		1126		1050	

* includes coding references assigned outside of the research questions ~ note that some survey reports used for this analysis did not detail the participant numbers.

Where then does advantage lie?

If disadvantage was not an issue, perhaps we should be looking for where advantage lies in education.

Where does advantage lie in remote education?							
What is education for?	Sources coded	Number of references coded			Per cent of references		chi-squared*
		Remote Aboriginal (n=347)	Non remote (n=378)	All sources (n=725)	Remote	Non-remote	
Language, land and culture	30	64	40	104	18.4%	10.6%	<.05
Identity	34	50	51	101	14.4%	13.5%	
Employment and economic participation	26	35	48	83	10.1%	12.7%	<.1
Strong in both worlds	34	40	30	70	11.5%	7.9%	
Meaningful engagement in the world	29	28	33	61	8.1%	8.7%	
Choice and opportunity	21	20	40	60	5.8%	10.6%	<.05
Community leadership and participation	19	25	26	51	7.2%	6.9%	
Learning	24	25	18	43	7.2%	4.8%	
Other purposes		60	92	152	17.4%	24.2%	
Totals		347	378	725	100.0%	100.0%	

Source: RES project data, qualitative analysis





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Part of the reason for the lack of response on issues of disadvantage relates to the way we asked questions (we didn't specifically ask about disadvantage). Nevertheless, if it had been a major concern, the opportunity to comment on it was certainly provided in discussions about how the system should respond. There was also opportunity for respondents to discuss this in terms of 'what education is for in remote Australia'. They could have said it was about overcoming disadvantage, poverty, closing gaps, improving living standards. But they did not.

The next table summarises the responses given for the question about what education is for. Remember again, that this data comes from a variety of sources. This question could also be interpreted as one that asks: 'where is the advantage in education for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?'. In contrast to the first table I showed, the number of responses given is much greater. Note again, that we have separated out the remote Aboriginal voice from other voices. The column labelled 'chi-squared' shows the probability that the different views are the same.

Table 2. Coding references for RQ1: What is education for in remote Australia and what can/should it achieve?

		Number of references coded			Per cent of references		
What is education for?	Sources coded	Remote Aboriginal (n=347)	Non remote (n=378)	All sources (n=725)	Remote	Non-remote	chi-squared*
Language, land and culture	30	64	40	104	18.4%	10.6%	<.05
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Community leadership and participation	19	25	26	51	7.2%	6.9%	
Learning	24	25	18	43	7.2%	4.8%	
Holistic	19	18	17	35	5.2%	4.5%	
Further learning and skills	17	11	18	29	3.2%	4.8%	
Socialisation to schooling	16	11	18	29	3.2%	4.8%	
Not sure what for	14	4	20	24	1.2%	5.3%	
Fun	11	9	9	18	2.6%	2.4%	
Sport	4	6	4	10	1.7%	1.1%	
Power	5	1	6	7	0.3%	1.6%	
Total references		347	378	725	100.0%	100.0%	

* Chi-squared test is used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the number of responses for remote Aboriginal and non-remote stakeholders

The largest number of references was coded at 'language, land and culture'. In abridged terms, this is about maintaining strong links to local language, kinship, and stories. This view of education was articulated more strongly by remote Aboriginal people (as noted in the column labelled 'chi squared'). The second issue of importance to respondents related to identity. There was frequent overlap between 'language, land and culture' and 'identity' themes, but the points of distinction was the importance of belonging, individuals knowing who they are, being confident and strong in spirit. The third response to the question 'what is education for?' related to employment and economic participation—the importance of education leading to jobs. The proportion of non-remote responses was significantly higher than remote Aboriginal responses. A fourth issue raised by many respondents was described as 'being strong in both worlds'. That is, respondents felt that young people needed to learn how to engage within their own culture and be confident engaging with western cultures. This was about being able to speak English and Aboriginal languages, knowing the rules of western cultures and knowing what was appropriate in both cultures. The fifth advantage of education was that it allowed for meaningful engagement in the world. In other words it should be about helping students learn to live in the world, being able to deal with the realities of life in community, building cultural capacity to deal with environments they find themselves in, engaging in relevant learning, enabling them to be productive, and broadening their horizons. A sixth purpose for education given, was about providing choice and opportunity. Responses to this question were more likely to come from non-remote respondents.

A range of other purposes for remote education were offered by respondents. These included the need for schools to prepare future community leaders, to become socialised to the norms of school, to offer pathways to further learning and to empower learners.

The point to take away from this table is that, according to our respondents, there are many advantages of engaging in education for remote learners. However, they are not about overcoming disadvantage, closing gaps or addressing poverty.

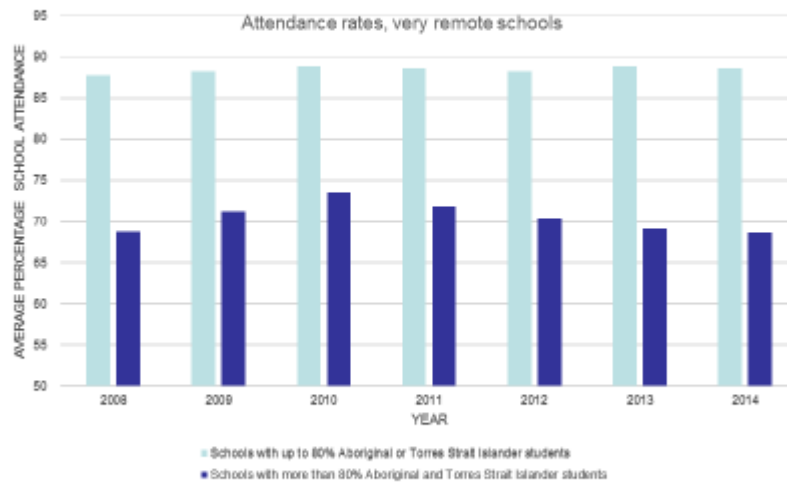
Just who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged and why?

The literature I cited earlier talks about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. The labelling of disadvantage is based on non-remote, non-Indigenous indicators of success and advantage. I'd like you to hold in your mind the qualitative findings mentioned before. But to explain this I am going to draw on some recent analysis of *My School* data.

Are students disadvantaged?

I first want to consider whether students from remote communities are disadvantaged.

Are students disadvantaged?



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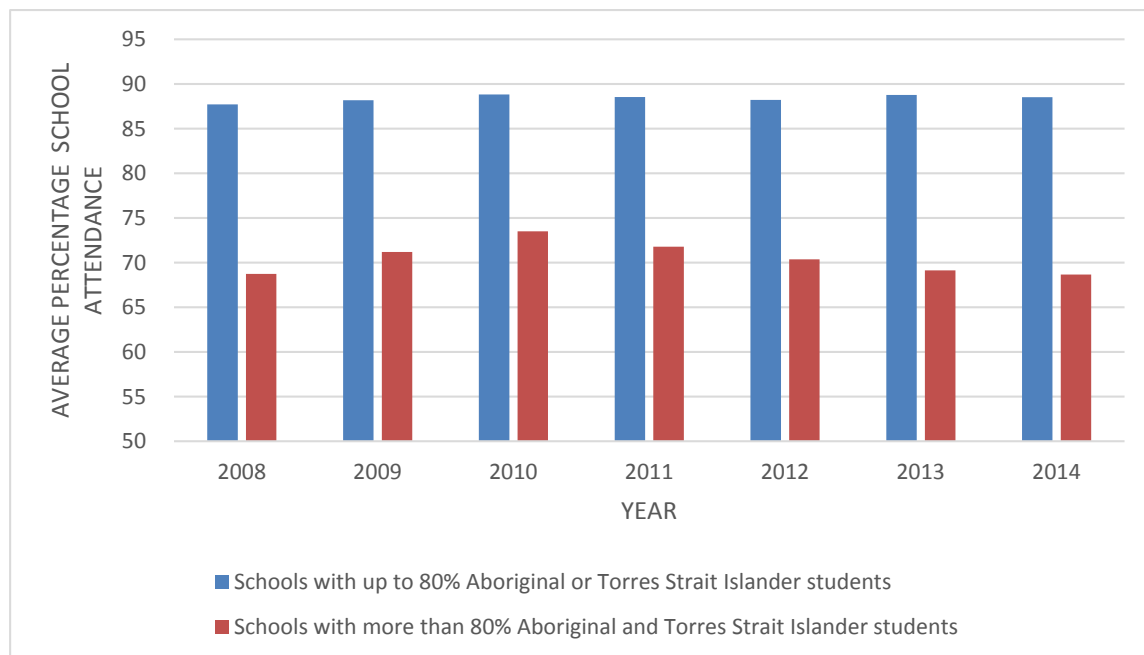
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Our research did not directly seek views from students. However, one thing we do know from our research is that attendance rates and retention through to year 12, and then transitions to employment or further/higher education are relatively lower than for non-Indigenous students, whether they are from remote communities or elsewhere. This next slide shows attendance trends for very remote schools from 2008 to 2014.

Figure 3. Average attendance rates for very remote schools



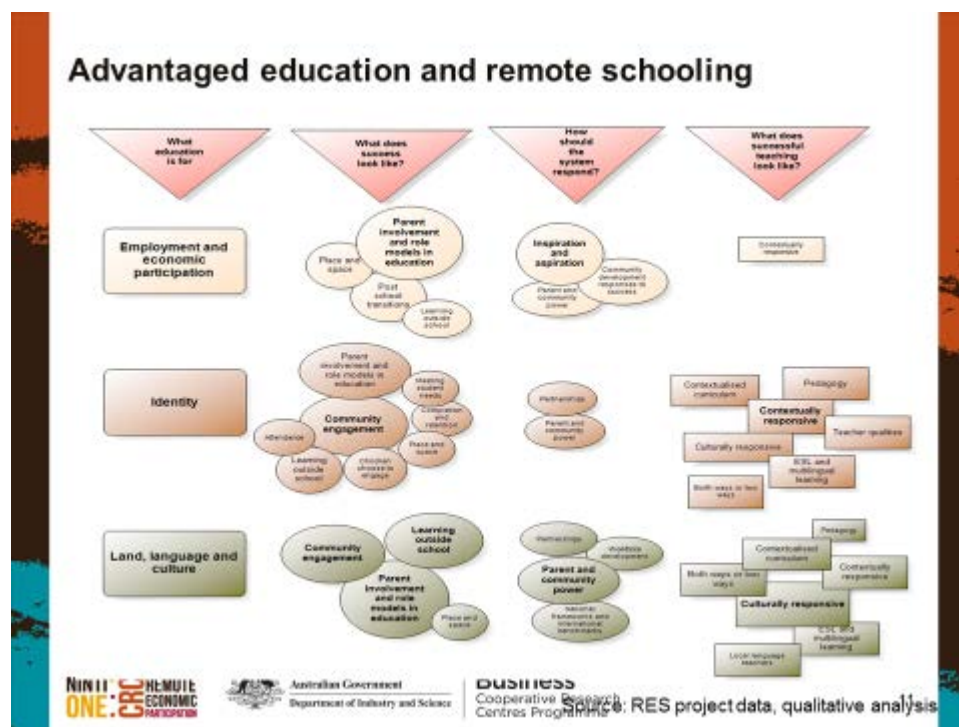
Source: (ACARA, 2015)

Attendance is, according to the Productivity Commission, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority and the Council of Australian Governments, a key indicator of engagement in and benefit from schooling. It follows that lower levels of attendance are associated with lower levels of engagement in learning and therefore reduced benefits of education. Despite the significant investment in remote schools over that period of time and the associated “commitment to action”, attendance rates in 2014 were the same as they were in 2008.

Does this of itself constitute a disadvantage? Our research suggests that in the case of very remote schools it is rather a reflection of young people’s choices to engage or not to engage. Therefore it may just reflect the extent to which students in remote communities see some advantage in what is on offer.

Are parents disadvantaged?

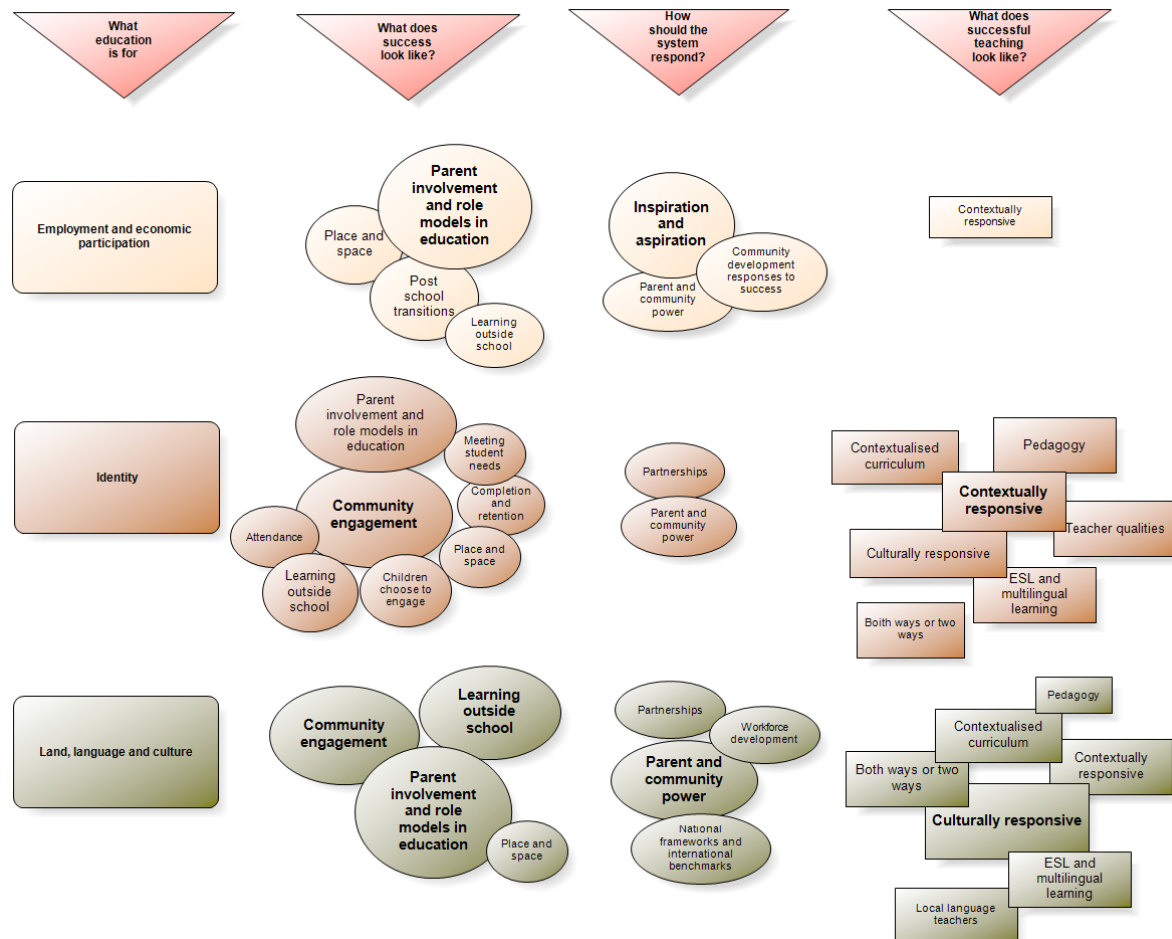
So if students are not disadvantaged, are remote parents disadvantaged by education that is on offer in schools?



The deficit discourse discussed earlier would lead many to believe that parents are being short changed by schools. Indeed, when we looked through the lens of what education is for in this next slide and apply an ‘employment and economic participation’ filter, we see some strong indications of what success would look like and how the ‘system’ might respond, but we don’t see too much in the way of how successful teaching might achieve that employment and economic participation purpose. By contrast, when we apply the ‘identity’ and ‘land, language and culture’ filters we see strong responses from respondents, not only about what success looks like, but how teachers can teach to that success. In short, parents are disadvantaged, but not because of their socioeconomic background (which makes up the Index of Community Socio Educational Advantage index score on My School) but because schools are not well equipped to effectively support students make a

transition into employment—even though, as the literature suggests—this is exactly what schools are for in Australia.

Figure 4. Applying an ‘education what for’ lens to the RES qualitative data on success, system response and successful teaching.



Are non-local educators and leaders disadvantaged?

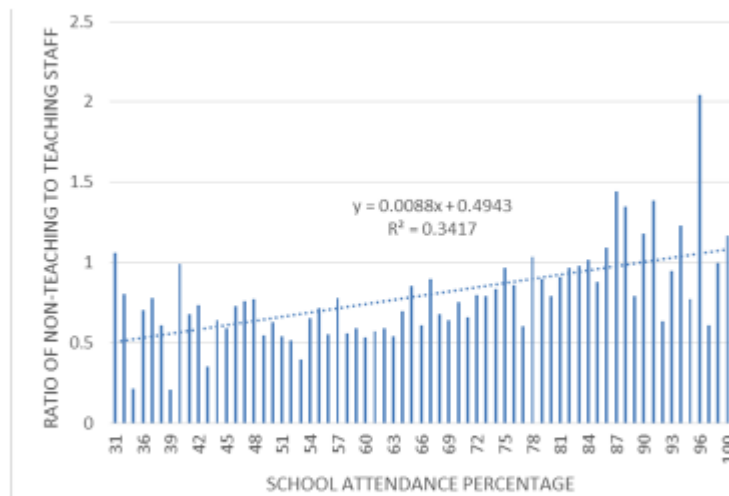
We don't often talk about this but what about non-local educators and leaders? Are they disadvantaged?

Non-local educators and leaders are at a distinct disadvantage, both compared to their local colleagues and their non-remote colleagues who teach or lead in non-remote schools. Non-local respondents, while not describing it as a disadvantage, talked about the importance of local language teachers, of ESL skills and the need to be contextually responsive, which you can see in the clusters of responses at the right in green and orange. In a non-remote school, these issues would probably hardly rate a mention (except perhaps in multicultural schools with non-English speakers). The apparent privilege that non-remote educators bring to schools counts for very little in a remote community. It may even be a hindrance.

Are local educators disadvantaged?

And what about local Aboriginal educators? Are they advantaged or disadvantaged?

The importance of non-teaching staff in remote schools



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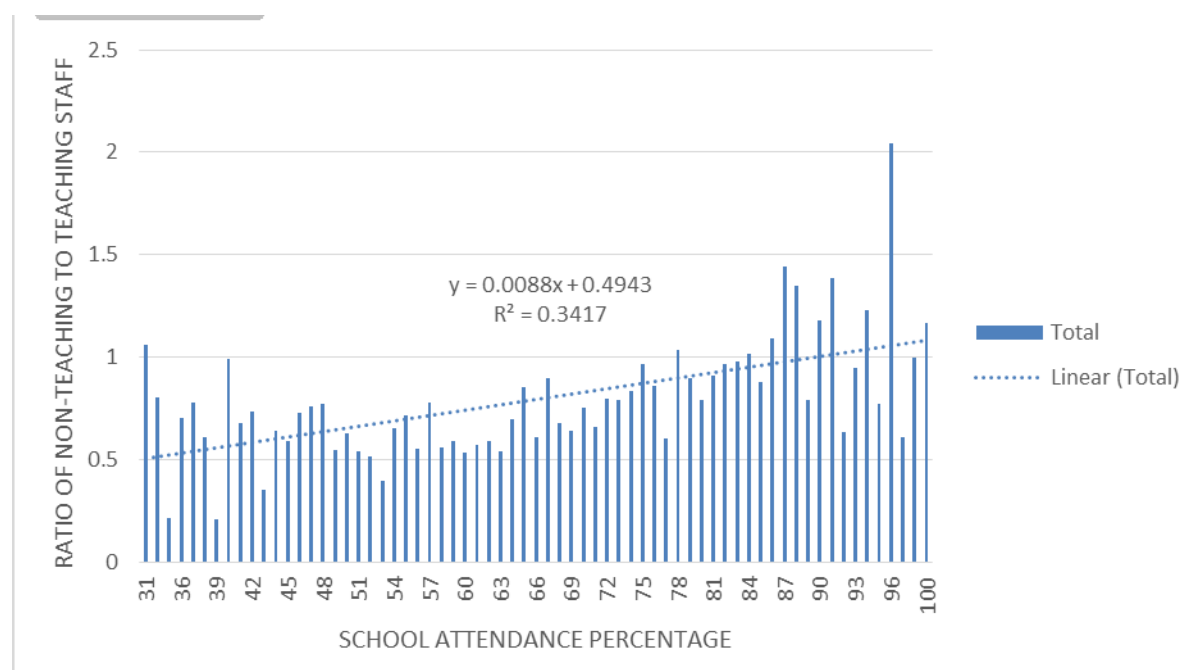
Source: My School data, 2008 to 2014

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Our qualitative data (reported elsewhere) shows that for remote Aboriginal participants, having local language educators in schools is critically important. Our analysis of My School data over seven years, shows that the higher the ratio of non-teaching staff to teaching staff, the higher the attendance rate in schools. This ratio, according to the correlation shown in this slide, explains 34 per cent of the difference in attendance rates of schools.

Yet, the same data shows that in 2014 nearly one in four very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students employed zero or just one non-teaching staff, let alone local language educators. Our analysis also suggests that local educators and support staff have a critical role working with families, dealing with teasing, and translating and interpreting for teachers who do not know the local language.

Figure 5. Ratio of non-teaching to teaching staff and average school attendance rates for very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.



Source: (ACARA, 2015)

Are employers disadvantaged?

Just who is disadvantaged?

- Students?
 - Not really... otherwise they would be demanding more.
- Parents?
 - Yes, they are being short-changed because schools are not able to see how they can transition students to work.
- Non-local educators and leaders?
 - Definitely. They know that their privilege counts for little in a remote community.
- Local educators?
 - Yes. There are far too few of them.
- Employers?
 - Yes. As noted above.
- School systems?
 - They need all the help they can get.

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Employers should be one of the key beneficiaries of a good education system. Yet our research shows fairly clearly that remote employers in mining, agriculture, retail and construction industries where the so-called 'real jobs' (Scullion, 2014) are, by and large, not choosing to—or able to—engage local people from remote communities in the work that is available (Guenther, 2013; Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014). Again, our research suggests that personal agency is a factor

contributing to the lack of employment uptake in these industries. Despite the recognition in our data that school should be about preparing people for work (see Table 2) there is a disconnect between what schools actually do and what employers need (as shown in Figure 5).

Are school systems disadvantaged?

The strategic policy focus on remote education over recent years points to a level of frustration among politicians and bureaucrats due to the apparent lack of response to education programs and initiatives. Programs are rolled out with fanfare and later quietly withdrawn until the next magic bullet is introduced to fix the 'intractable' problem of remote education (see Wilson, 2014). The education system is often described in hegemonic terms as if it held great power over those it covers through various education acts, ministers and statutory bodies. The irony is that despite the threats to withdraw welfare payments (for example through SEAM) and the carrot of an apparently better life, change is elusive. The hegemony has seemingly little influence over students who are refusing to buy into the so called 'good life'. Our take on this is that the system needs help to overcome its own deficits or disadvantages in this regard.

Conclusion

Conclusion

The sooner we recognise that students do not see themselves as poor, disadvantaged individuals, the sooner we collectively may find the kinds of solutions that are required for communities.

We need a new language to talk about remote education—one that does away with false notions of disadvantage and disparity and replaces them with a language of contextual complexity.

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In summary, what I have tried to show in this lecture, is that the concept of disadvantage as it is applied to people in remote communities is fundamentally flawed.

Remote Education Systems project data shows that not only do people from remote communities fail to mention the concept, but the descriptors of disadvantage in terms of poverty, deficit and gaps are constructed externally based on a set of philosophical, economic, historical, social and psychological assumptions that come from somewhere else—certainly not the remote community context. I argue that if students in remote communities saw advantage in engaging in education then they would be demanding more of the education system. But they are not—except perhaps those whose parents and families do aspire to have what the system offers.

I have also shown that above and beyond employment and economic participation remote Aboriginal participants in our research see the purpose of education (that is the advantage) being for maintaining connection to culture, land and language and to reinforce and strengthen their identities. They want to be 'strong in two worlds' as they see the western world of the system stand in contrast to the real world of their country. Our respondents articulated clear pathways to achieving these advantages through successful teaching in schools. They couldn't do the same for the goals of employment and economic participation.

Those who develop policies for remote schools often do not bear these non-negotiables in mind. They may think they hold the keys to advantage and therefore expect a favourable response to their good intentions. But I contend that it is not students in remote communities who are disadvantaged (at least in their own minds), rather it is first and foremost education systems that are disadvantaged. After all, nothing they have tried so far has worked particularly well in effecting the kind of rapid change expected from remote communities. Unfortunately, as a result of their failures parents, employers, local and non-local educators are all short changed in the process.

While we haven't had time in this lecture to unpack what we see as the answers (and there are plenty coming out of our research), we first need to find a new language to talk about schools in remote communities. A language of contextual complexity is perhaps more appropriate than a language of disadvantage, deficit and gaps as we collectively attempt to find a path that satisfies the expectations and aspirations, first for remote people and also for teachers, employers, political leaders and bureaucrats. These aspirations are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Suggested readings

- Guenther, J., Bat, M., & Osborne, S. (2013). Red Dirt Thinking on Educational Disadvantage. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 100-110. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.18
- Guenther, J. (2013). Are We Making Education Count in Remote Australian Communities or Just Counting Education? *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 157-170. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.23
- Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2014). Digging up the (red) dirt on education: one shovel at a time. *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues (Special Edition)*, 17(4), 40-56.

Questions for discussion

1. What can/should schools of education do to promote a critical discourse about educational advantage in remote schools?
2. What do you think is the relationship between concepts of disadvantage and equity?
3. How would (or should) a remote primary school better prepare young people for economic participation?
4. If non-teaching staff and teaching assistants are important for promoting school participation, how can or should schools and departments of education best support their roles?
5. Should teachers be held to account for low levels of school attendance in communities?

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- Guenther, J., Bat, M., & Osborne, S. (2013). Red Dirt Thinking on Educational Disadvantage. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 100-110. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.18
- Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2014). Digging up the (red) dirt on education: one shovel at a time. *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues (Special Edition)*, 17(4), 40-56.

- Guenther, J., & McRae-Williams, E. (2014). *Does education and training for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lead to 'real' jobs? Evidence from the 2011 Census* Paper presented at the AVETRA 17th International Conference, Surfers Paradise.
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