



NINTI ONE **CRC** **REMOTE ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION**

Between the bookends: what else matters other than attendance and economic development in remote education?

Presentation by Sam Osborne to the Australian Education Union Federal Conference, 21 February 2014.

CRC for Remote Economic Participation

Ninti One Limited ABN 28 106 610 833

PO Box 3971

Alice Springs NT 0871

P (08) 8959 6000

F (08) 8959 6048

W www.crc-rep.com.au

The bookends of remote education policy and rhetoric

Today Ian and I have been invited to share some thoughts and perspectives on remote education and the implications for how we might advocate for improved practice and educational outcomes in the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education space.

Since the election of a new federal government, there has been a significant re-structure of federal government service provision for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The former Department responsible for Indigenous Affairs (FaCHSIA) has been brought in under Prime Minister and Cabinet and the ministerial responsibility for getting the job done essentially lies with Senator Nigel Scullion.

This is important to understand within the broader landscape as this structure means that the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council is currently informing the policies and priorities of remote education as part of the broader agenda of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. The Advisory Council is made up of 12 members, none of whom are educators and this is of some concern (see news.com.au 2013).

The early focus of policy and activity in remote education has clearly been laid out in terms of the need to make improvements in school attendance rates and economic development. I will address the area of school attendance and suggest what else needs to sit between the policy bookends of attendance and economic development, and Ian will address the field of transitions from school to employment in the remote schooling context.

Currently I am working as a Senior Research Fellow at UniSA within the Remote Education Systems project. The project within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) is a five-year project designed to investigate how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations, aspirations and needs (for more information visit CRC-REP 2014). It will identify strategies and models that will improve outcomes for students and their families. The project team, based in Alice Springs, is working to engage with a wide range of remote education stakeholders, with a particular focus on the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia.

If you would like to read or view more on the Remote Education Systems project, there is a special journal edition recently published in the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* titled 'Red Dirt Thinking' (Herbert 2013) and also the Sidney Myer Rural lecture presented in Alice Springs last September where three Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara) educators joined me on the theme, 'Red Dirt Curriculum; Reimagining Remote Education' (Osborne et al. 2013) which can be viewed online with a published monograph available soon.

I will unpack the attendance debates further, but here's the short of it:

We know that attendance rates are poor in very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools as a cohort. Everyone is keen to see remote student attendance and learning outcomes improve. The evidence suggests that heavily attendance-focused strategies do not necessarily improve very remote student attendance and that improved attendance accounts for very little in improvements in measures such as NAPLAN scores.

This raises two important questions I'd like to offer here for reflection:

"If not just truancy officers, then what else can we do in remote education?" And, "If NAPLAN is a poor measure of success in remote schooling, then what constitutes a good remote education and how can we tell it's working?"

Points of philosophical, epistemological and ontological difference

In recent years, remote education has been brought more closely into the broader national focus on uniform measurement of student attainment in English language literacy and numeracy, national teacher standards, and the introduction of the Australian curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2012a, 2012b, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2011). This focus on nationalised and international approaches to standards, testing and performance has directed the attention of remote educators and remote education systems away from localised approaches to curriculum and education more broadly and reaffirmed the notion that a remote education is essentially both inferior and failing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics such as Nakata (2007a), Rigney (1999), Arbon (2008), Ford (2010) and others highlight that the western philosophies that underpin mainstream Australian society and the broader education system is at odds with the axiologies, epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies (that is, ways of knowing, being and doing) of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, particularly in the red dirt contexts of very remote communities. This is a critical point to understand in seeing very remote communities as part of the national collective, but with marked and distinct differences at their heart and foundation. This means that as non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 'Red Dirt' educators, we cannot assume that our students and their communities share our sense of the purpose of education and our 'common sense' assumptions about what education should prepare us for.

Attendance and performance data

More recently, nationally compared measures of attendance and NAPLAN (National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy) results (benchmark testing on English literacy and Numeracy) has highlighted the relatively poor performance of very remote schools in comparison to other schools across Australia (COAG Reform Council 2013b). Policies such as 'Closing the Gap' and the rhetoric of addressing disadvantage have again directed attention towards improving outcomes for what is a very narrow perspective on what constitutes a good education. Although I want to spend time highlighting the strengths and capacities of remote communities, we need to recognise that these communities continue to face significant challenges in relation to high levels of unemployment, self-harm and substance abuse amongst young people; family violence; and concerns about the wellbeing of children and young people (see for example Australian Indigenous Health/InfoNet 2013,

Forum et al. 2009, Mulligan 2008, Smee 2013). These are very real and ongoing issues for remote communities as well as for education.

Looking at the five-year view from 2008 to 2012, there has been little or no improvement in relation to attendance and NAPLAN scores for very remote schools. In fact, the gap between very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other Australian students has increased (see Guenther 2013b). In 2013, the data showed some small but hopeful signs of improvement in very remote school results, although it should be noted that commensurate improvements were achieved in the same cohorts nationally, so the 'gap' has not closed in any sense. Interestingly, it appears these improvements in very remote school NAPLAN data have come on the back of decreased attendance rates. We know that NAPLAN is a crude instrument in terms of measuring student performance in very remote schools, but it is worth remembering that these are the measures that establish very remote schools as being behind, or failing, and this influences the priorities that remote education systems adopt (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2012a).

School attendance is an important measure of educational success. This graph shows attendance figures from 2008 to 2012 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Guenther 2013c). As you can see, where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment is below 80%, attendance figures have remained static at around 88%. But in schools where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment is over 80%, there has been a slight variation across the five-year period, but five years on, the attendance rate – despite all of the focus, all of the campaigns, programs and slogans – remain about the same as five years ago in 2008.

Very little has changed.

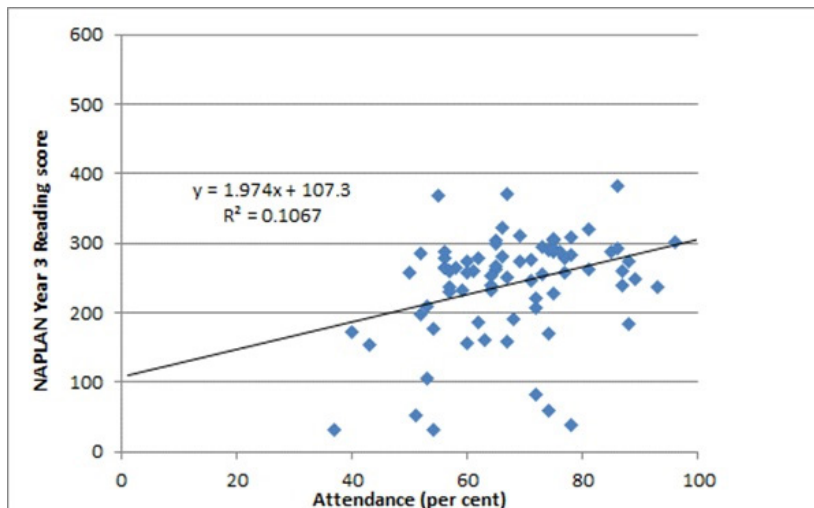


(source - adapted from Guenther 2013c)

I'm not suggesting for a moment that school attendance is not extremely important for a whole range of reasons. In fact, as a former remote school principal, I can assure you that this is something we lie awake at night worrying about and most remote educators make every effort to get students to school wherever possible. One of my former colleagues was burdened with the double-edged sword of being both the teacher of a class of elusive secondary boys and young men

as well as being insomniac. He used to spend long nights plotting all manner of plans and schemes to lure these young fellas into the classroom. Some of these plans were questionable and others plain ludicrous, but the point is, attending school matters, both to policy makers and remote educators.

But as we'll see, we might need to re-think our assumptions about what improved attendance means for very remote schools and students.



Attendance vs NAPLAN Year 3 Reading Score, 2012
very remote schools >80 per cent Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students (n=80)
 (source - Guenther 2013a)

Across mainstream Australia, data suggest that there is a strong relationship between attendance and performance, but in very remote schools where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment is above 80%, the data show a relationship between attendance rates and NAPLAN scores that is so small that attendance explains around 10% of the variance in NAPLAN results (see Guenther 2013a). In other words, the logic that improved attendance will see a significant increase in performance, namely, NAPLAN scores, in very remote schools is not supported by the data.

It's probably fair to say that these data that my colleague John Guenther has analysed have not been warmly received at political and bureaucratic levels because it confronts accepted logic at two levels: firstly, it seems counter-intuitive that improved school attendance wouldn't necessarily result in improved outcomes; and secondly, it reminds us that simplistic solutions are not adequate and the data demand that the debate become more complex.

James Ladwig and Alan Luke (2013) went further in describing the attendance and performance data in stating that:

... in schools with significant Indigenous populations, there is no [emphasis mine] overall relationship between improved attendance and achievement at a school level. In fact, Fig. 6 makes it very clear that the gain cohorts with the highest gains cover the full range of attendance change—high and low, including schools in which mean attendance dropped. (p. 19)

As they further explain, remote schools that experience a decrease in attendance are just as likely to see an improvement in NAPLAN scores as schools where attendance goes up.

Other data show that very remote non-Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory perform on par with their Darwin-based peers in NAPLAN results (see Guenther 2013a). This suggests that factors such as remoteness and distance don't matter so much in terms of NAPLAN results, but the distance of things like language, culture, values, and ways of knowing, being and doing from the dominant western philosophies that inform schooling and subsequent testing are what determines the 'gap' against these assessment measures.

There is also ample evidence that suggests standardised testing results correlate strongly to the socio-economic status of the students and corresponding education levels of their parents (Biesta 2010, COAG Reform Council 2013a, Garrett 2012, Miller & Voon 2011, Robinson & Aronica 2009). Perry & McConney (2010) suggest that factors such as Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scores, and therefore social advantage, account for more than half of the variation in NAPLAN achievement, whilst others such as Ainley & Rothman (2010) do put some caveats on this type of assertion but also recognise the relationship between social advantage and NAPLAN test scores.

Positioning remote students in the purpose of education question

In western terms, education and the economy are closely related (Becker 1993). There is a philosophy that a community is built around economy. The community impact of closures in manufacturing in Australia are an example of the 'communities and economy' relationship. Every so often, rhetoric about remote communities being 'allowed' to exist or their continuing to receive services being conditional on their economic viability reminds us of this fact (Tudge 2011). In the bush, this logic rings true for mining companies who walk away from their mining operation if there is no longer any money to be made, but remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities are firmly rooted in a significantly different philosophical, historical and relational position in regards to land and the reason to be on country.

This positions very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a significantly different way as to the reasons and motivations for engaging in school or getting a job.

Nonetheless, teachers remind students in remote schools over and over: If you come to school every day, you can learn to read and write, finish school, maybe go away to boarding school or university and then you'll be able to look after yourself and then come back and help your family and community (see for example Burns 2012, Elks 2011). But through interviews and discussions held with remote Aboriginal community members, we continue to see that this thinking can be somewhat foreign and the value of learning, knowledge, aspiration, imagining and identity remain firmly grounded in the Red Dirt context of the community. This disparity in a sense of externally focused aspiration and assumptions about what education is for leaves educators feeling frustrated by poor attendance and engagement, particularly into the secondary years that are so important for transitioning into employment and further learning.

To improve remote education outcomes, State and Territory governments have focused on areas for improvement such as school attendance rates, introducing teacher standards, teaching a national curriculum, attempts to increase student numbers attending boarding schools, improving

employment opportunities, pre-employment education and training options and an early childhood focus, among others (Standing Council on Federal Financial Relations 2012, 2013). In recent months, this area of focus has narrowed under the direction of the Prime Minister's advisory council to the policy bookends of school attendance and economic development. So far, the most visible of these policy actions is the \$28 million federal government announcement of 400 locally employed truancy officers across 40 target communities (see Metherell 2013).

There is an understandable logic to creating local employment to get kids to school. By creating jobs, more people in communities can find accessible and local work and it should add value to the efforts of the local school. Our research also supports the notion that it is extremely unlikely for young people in remote communities to imagine themselves into employment or voluntary and community-based roles if they have not seen their family laying footprints for them to follow in this path (Burton & Osborne 2014, Ninti One 2013, Osborne & Guenther 2013).

In the Northern Territory, a draft review of Indigenous education has just been made available (Wilson 2014). It recognises the significant efforts over the last few years to improve attendance rates through the SEAM trial and the Every Child at School Every Day strategy, which includes social workers as truancy officers, family meetings and prosecution of parents as a last option, but this has not been a common occurrence. The report highlights the attendance dilemma with the following data and analysis:

Table 4 shows that overall Indigenous attendance declined by 2% between 2009 and 2012 while enrolment remained static. While provincial Indigenous attendance improved by 2%, remote attendance declined by 2.2% and very remote by 3.7%. The evident decline in remote and very remote attendance occurred over the period when the Every Child, Every Day policy might have been expected to begin to show results.

	2009			2012		
	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Total	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Total
Provincial	80.8%	90.6%	88.7%	82.8%	90.7%	89.2%
Remote	80.2%	92.0%	86.6%	78.0%	90.9%	84.8%
Very Remote	61.8%	89.3%	65.5%	58.1%	88.8%	62.1%
Total	69.7%	90.8%	81.4%	67.8%	90.6%	80.6%

(Note that 'Provincial' refers to the Darwin/Palmerston region)

Given that the Every Child, Every Day policy has seen a decline in attendance rates in remote and very remote schools in the Territory, it's unclear as to why the report then recommends that these measures be 'hardened':

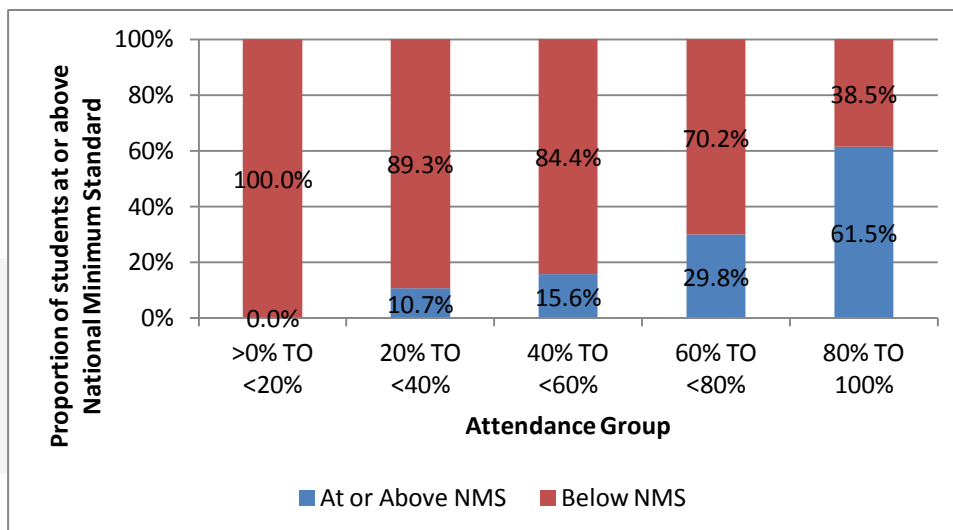
Communities will not be viable unless they resume responsibility for their own children. For that reason we argue that the success of Australian Government initiatives and the stronger measures under Every Child Every Day are critical to the future not only of the children but also of their families and communities.

The report continues with some discussion about who is really responsible for ensuring children attend school, noting the implementation of the federal government's truancy officer initiative as another player in the space and a whole range of factors that may also improve attendance. The report cites Hancock et al. (2013) as the justification for establishing the link between improved attendance rates and improved NAPLAN results. This was a UWA (University of Western Australia) based study that examines every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child enrolled in WA as a single entity. The Wilson report suggests that the Hancock et al. study (2013):

... argues that improving the attendance of disadvantaged students might help to reduce these achievement gaps or prevent them from becoming wider. (p.7)

The Wilson report also offers a graph to advocate the need to stop wasting resources in encouraging poor-attending students where results will not improve and seek to lift those students currently attending 3 days a week to 4 days a week in order to double their NAPLAN scores and therefore have maximum impact for effort.

The graph used to support this idea incorporates all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Northern Territory, but again, doesn't disaggregate those students in terms of remoteness, in particular, noting the cultural, epistemological and ontological distance between very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the town-based populations. Therefore it would be reasonable to assume that given the previous attendance figures shown, very remote students are generally not attending 80% and their NAPLAN scores are relatively low. Therefore, those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who generally attend over 80% are likely to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students based in Darwin and other town centres where English is likely to be a first language and schools are integrated student populations. This graph better explains the demographics and distribution of social advantage amongst the entire NT population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rather than providing an evidence base for the argument that attending 4 days instead of 3 will result in vastly improved NAPLAN scores.



NT Government Indigenous students – % at or above national minimum standard by attendance band (Wilson 2014)

The discussion about attendance in remote schools is far from simple. In Tony Abbott's recent delivery of the Closing the Gap Report (Abbott 2014), he added school attendance to the priorities for the Closing the Gap agenda, demonstrating the priority of this issue. Even in laying out the need for an attendance target, the argument can get a little lost in the chicken or the egg type question and offer a series of sometimes competing logics. At one point it seemed he was suggesting that poor attendance was directly attributable to poor or failing schools and at another point, it seemed it was the parents who were squarely to blame. In other corners, there were debates about whether to fix attendance first and then work on making schools more attractive to students, or whether making schools attractive is the key to lifting attendance.

So returning to the key questions:

"If not just truancy officers, then what else can we do in remote education?" And, "If NAPLAN is a poor measure of success in remote schooling, then what constitutes a good remote education and how can we tell it's working?"

I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't encourage students to attend school, to learn to read and write in English, seek trade training opportunities or get a job; in fact it is very important that our current efforts are vastly improved in this regard. Boarding school participation has again been made prominent by the Wilson review as an attendance strategy among other things, and this is an important opportunity to capitalise on for *some* remote students, but not as blanket policy. There are currently boarding schools providing positions for remote students with large vacancies as demand is not nearly enough to fill what is available now. If very remote students are to find their element in education and economic participation, we need to see the essential elements of relationship to the land, family, language and reaffirming the value of the student's identity as critical anchor points for hooking students into the otherwise unfamiliar social and academic norms of western schooling.

I was heartened by the Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda's comments last week on ABC 24 (ABC 2014) in relation to the Closing the Gap report presented by the Prime Minister Tony Abbot. Whilst on the one hand he acknowledged that attendance and NAPLAN results remain a disappointment, stating, "Of course it's a problem - we see some appalling attendance rates around the country," but went on to say,

The anecdotal evidence I see is kids are really comfortable going to things like TAFE colleges rather than high school...Let's look at...the quality of education our kids are getting in the high school - what's causing them to drop out?

These are the critical questions.

Yes, attendance, but what else?

The love of learning is a strongly held value in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities. From an advocacy perspective, blaming teachers or crying 'school failure' (Hughes & Hughes 2012) is neither helpful nor an intelligent assessment of what's happening in communities.

So what are some practical examples of programs or initiatives that are working and are worth taking note of in improving attendance and also the levels of engagement with students and the wider community?

We could examine things like the community-led investment into adult learning centres across Central Australia and ask why people *are* attending (see Kral & Schwab 2012).

Despite the fact that Mutitjulu Community does not have truancy officers and the year has begun with three sorry camps and funerals in the community (recently cited as a barrier to school attendance; see Karvelis 2014), Nyangatjatjara College has had to put on extra vehicles to collect students for school in recent weeks. I put this down to a strong community involvement and governance model coupled with some (perhaps) old fashioned ideas such as caring staff + strong relationships = strong attendance and engagement with the school. The community trusts the school to look after their young people during periods of grief.

There are a number of remote schools that have developed relationships with city schools well beyond an annual visit from a busload of city kids. These look more like both-ways (Yunupingu 1999) knowledge and social exchanges with learning-on-country programs such as is happening in Maningrida and building strong, long-term relationships that support remote students to succeed in boarding programs into the future.

Many deeply valued community activities are absolutely part of the national curriculum and can constitute the development of a good remote education. Language, the arts, digital media, local histories, corporation governance, land rights, land tenure and the economic relationship between the two, intercultural exchanges, sport, ecological knowledge and its relationship to environmental science are just some of the things that happen with a voracious appetite outside school hours and outside the school gates that can be brought within the school's curriculum and community engagement practices to make the local school the best place to be in the minds of young people.

Let's assume for a moment that remote schools across the nation will have achieved 90% attendance rates in the near future. We need to be hoping for the best and preparing for bustling and busy classrooms to be dynamic learning spaces and places that remote students and their families choose to be at on a daily basis.

We need to be doing things now to ensure we've got the policy and practice in place for the post-attendance period. Identifying, training and supporting quality teachers, both local and from the cities, remains an obvious area that needs attention.

This means growing the help we want. Perhaps systems and universities need to be focusing on remote education-specific courses with incentives for those who invest their time and professional focus in the bush. We need to be equipping remote teachers to be resilient, well informed, professional and collaborative in remote schools. I'm not so worried about whether teachers had a politically left or right leaning lecturer or course outline at University (as seems to be in the current political debates), I'm more interested in what teachers can do when they don't understand what their students are saying or have no read at all on the social context that informs a bum on a seat. I'm more interested in how a teacher will approach a student who feels traumatised and needs sleep when they arrive at school. I'm more interested in how teachers engage students in learning that brings the light of learning to the students.

There is a great need to re-visit the role of local Aboriginal educators and their training so that they are not relegated to addressing attendance issues and managing student behaviour or viewed as incapable because the life experiences and skills they bring aren't focused on English and maths the same as metropolitan non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

At some point, somebody needs to ask why competent and committed school principals who value and engage students, their families and the broader community in learning and the school culture more broadly tend to enjoy much higher attendance rates than principals who are overly focused on mainstream standards and working from deficit language and paradigms in regards to the community they work in.

So what do remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators suggest as pedagogy for improved practice in building a sense of purpose and belonging in very remote schools?

Katrina Tjitayi (see Osborne et al. 2013, Tjitayi & Osborne 2013) is a qualified Anangu (Pitjantjatjara) teacher and is currently the School Improvement Coordinator in the APY lands in the remote North West region of South Australia. She lays out the nature of diagnosing problems in remote education in these terms:

If a tree is not growing properly, we have to seek really hard to find the problem. When we look at the tree, we see only the top part but we need to look deeper at the roots. We must look deep inside to see what is not working. In Anangu education, sometimes we spend all of our time looking at the leaves and the branches, but we need to look well below the ground to understand what it is that is really happening for our children. (Osborne et al. 2013)

In Tjitayi and Osborne (2014), Katrina describes the role of family as “close voices” as critical in building confidence and “opening the spirit” to learning and new knowledge. She argues that for Anangu, learning “feels different” and knowledge that “sticks” is held in the spirit. Teachers can enable an open spirit in their teaching practice by understanding how to engage with children and making room for family and community engagement in the teaching and learning process.

Rueben Burton (Burton & Osborne 2014) is the Anangu Coordinator at Amata Anangu School also in the APY lands, South Australia and he reminds us that students hold a sense of aspiration and ‘imagined futures’ (Nakata 2007b) viewed through the lens of following the footprints laid by the family members. Without this focal point of family and a red dirt, place-based concept of aspiration and the future, Rueben contends that young people give up and lay on their back, unable to see ahead to any sense of the future.

Beginning to engage the deeper questions of education requires remote educators to embrace a wider and longer-term view of positive potential that families and communities offer student improvement in education. In this regard, the Wilson report does argue the need for clear, longer-term planning, community engagement and high expectations across a range of important areas of schooling such as literacy pedagogy, behaviour management and so on. But this message seems swallowed up in the failure and deficit narrative as a political mandate to usher in the latest phase of what Katrina Tjitayi’s tree metaphor would consider to be the vigorous pruning of leaves, rather than seeing below ground level to the roots.

We need to stop talking and writing about remote families and communities, their values and languages, ways of knowing, being and doing (Arbon 2008) as barriers to apparent ‘success’ or evidence of incapacity and reimagine the potential that intergenerational community assets hold to build confidence, add value and offer advantage to remote school students.

Finally, I want to address the question of measurement. We know that NAPLAN is one tool. It is not the most useful tool to assist educators, families and policy makers in assessing the relative merits of education in very remote communities. So what else can we do?

Very remote students are predominantly first language speakers of languages other than English, sometimes multiple languages other than English. The ESL Scope & Scales have been an important part of literacy assessment and diagnosis in remote South Australian schools in the past and were a required component of the school annual report. This type of resource and process would be far more useful in terms of measuring very remote student learning outcomes and could be implemented more broadly for a collective assessment of very remote student progress.

Many schools carry out benchmark testing in reading and numeracy. This is a useful process for the class teacher to conduct with the student as it provides clear and immediate feedback to the teacher as to where the student is at with their learning and how best to target future learning. Many schools hold this type of data internally for informing daily practice and it would seem a sensible idea to allow a platform for sharing data on student improvement more widely.

In 2012 and 2013, I worked with a team of Aboriginal Community Researchers (ACRs) and conducted student and family interviews about the mental health and wellbeing of young people (see Ninti One 2012, 2013), with a particular view to measuring the impact of the MindMatters program in the Southern region of the Northern Territory. This process was not overly complex and provided important feedback and data to the Nyangatjatjara College board, the staff and the MindMatters team about community concerns for their young people, but in particular, the development of language and confidence to engage in conversations about the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

Children's Ground is an innovative approach to provide holistic community-based education with high levels of community involvement and ownership. Sharing the process, they have developed their own rubric of what is important and how they can measure their progress.

The point is, we need to resist being limited to the narrow frame of attendance as our measure of success in remote education and return to the important questions of, 'What is a good remote education that enables aspiration and success on a range of measures?' 'How can we best position young people for successful and happy lives on their own terms?' and, 'How can we best measure whether we're making any progress?'

Going to school is important and so is getting a job, as well as leading productive and positive lives at the family and community level. But externally imagined, simplistic solutions don't work in remote community policy and it's time to re-visit our policy platforms for engaging the root of the remote education tree. Identity and belonging as the foundation of school culture and curriculum, building an inside-out capacity for aspiration and an imagined future and ensuring that remote Aboriginal people are front and centre in remote education are concepts that need to inform our next policy phase in the post-attendance policy period.

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