

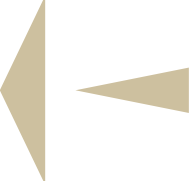


red dirt education

A compilation of learnings from the Remote Education Systems project



NINTI
ONE **REMOTE**
ECONOMIC
PARTICIPATION



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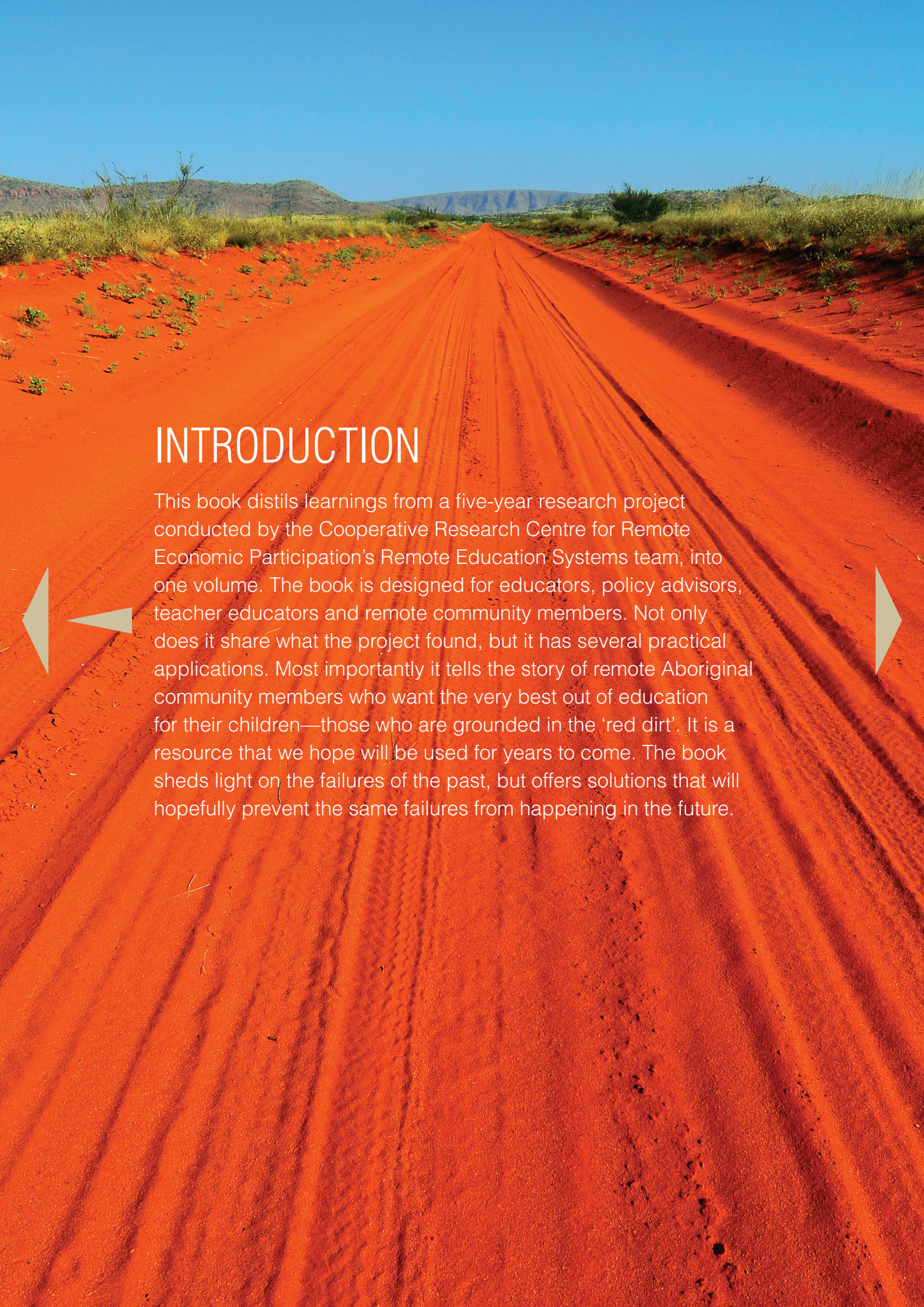
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INTRODUCTION

This book distills learnings from a five-year research project conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's Remote Education Systems team, into one volume. The book is designed for educators, policy advisors, teacher educators and remote community members. Not only does it share what the project found, but it has several practical applications. Most importantly it tells the story of remote Aboriginal community members who want the very best out of education for their children—those who are grounded in the 'red dirt'. It is a resource that we hope will be used for years to come. The book sheds light on the failures of the past, but offers solutions that will hopefully prevent the same failures from happening in the future.

HOW TO USE THIS E-BOOK

About the contributors

This e-book is based on findings of the Remote Education Systems (RES) project within the [Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation](#) (CRC-REP). The project team consisted of John Guenther, Sam Osborne, Samantha Disbray and Melodie Bat. We also acknowledge the work of Chris Duncan, particularly in setting up a database of My School data. Our post-graduate students also added to the outputs of the project and we acknowledge them: Philip Townsend, Tessa Benveniste, Ruth Ratcliffe, Byron Wilson, Patricia Bourke, Susannah Emery and Jillian Miller.

Structure

The Red Dirt e-book is based on a series of lectures that were conducted by the RES team during 2015. The book is structured around topics that come from findings of the project. There are five sections. [Section 1](#) deals with introductory, contextual and methodological issues. [Section 2](#) considers theoretical perspectives that underpin RES work. [Section 3](#) is devoted to representing the voices of our respondents, particularly those Aboriginal stakeholders who live and belong in their country that has been ascribed 'remote' by others. [Section 4](#), based on the findings, considers system responses for improving outcomes. [Section 5](#) looks forward to emerging issues.

Each chapter offers a brief overview, key points, a brief examination of the relevant literature, a summary of evidence from the project and links to additional resources and info-graphics. Each chapter includes a short one- to two-minute video introduction of the theme. The chapters are designed to be discrete chunks and are designed for different groups of people. Some are more academic and theoretical, while others are a lot more practical. Some have application for universities, while others will be of use to community members, teachers or those working in educational policy, curriculum development or some other area of strategy.

While this is not designed as an academic book, we have included a [reference list](#) at the end of the book.

Definitions and key terms

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

In general, we refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples rather than Indigenous peoples throughout this e-book. Where we are specifically only referring to one group or the other we will be specific. We also refer to specific Aboriginal nations at times.

Remote schools

In this e-book, the main concern we have is for schools that are classified as 'very remote' both by the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) and by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

Disadvantage

We view the term 'disadvantage' as a Western construct that has been developed to give a sense of privilege to the values, knowledges and ways of being that are not rooted in the context of remote Australia.

English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D)

Where EAL/D is used, it refers to speakers for whom Standard Australian English is a second or subsequent language or dialect, and whose first language may include Aboriginal English, creoles and traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island languages.

Shortened forms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
AIEF	Australian Indigenous Education Foundation
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
ARIA	Accessibility/Remote Index of Australia
CDU	Charles Darwin University
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRC-REP	Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation
EAL/D	English as an additional language or dialect
ESL	English as a second language
ICSEA	Index for Community Socio-Educational Advantage
NAPLAN	National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy
NARU	North Australian Research Unit
NGO	non-government organisation
NT	Northern Territory
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RATEP	Remote Area Teacher Education Program
RES	Remote Education Systems project
RQ	research question
RSAS	Remote School Attendance Strategy
SA	South Australia
SEAM	School Enrolment and Attendance Measure
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
SLA	second language acquisition
TESOL	teaching English to speakers of other languages
TOTTS	Thinking Outside The Tank Sessions
UniSA	University of South Australia
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WA	Western Australia

The Red Dirt Education Lecture Series

The e-book is based on a series of 11 lectures delivered over 12 months from November 2014 to November 2015. You can download the PowerPoint presentations, papers, audios and videos of these by clicking on the links below.

1.	What is education for in remote schools? 26 November 2014 UNISA, Adelaide			
2.	The advantaged and disadvantaged of remote schools 30 April 2015 Flinders University, Adelaide			
3.	Complexity and chaos in remote education 24 June 2015 Flinders University, Adelaide			
4.	Workforce development for remote schools 21 July 2015 CDU, Darwin			
5.	Successful remote schools: what are they? 29 July 2015 University of Notre Dame, Broome			
6.	Teacher quality and qualities 12 August 2015 CDU, Darwin			
7.	Culturally and contextually responsive schools 2 September 2015 University of New England, Armidale			
8.	Red Dirt Curriculum and the Australian Curriculum: how do they line up? 24 September 2015 Flinders University, Adelaide			
9.	Language teaching and learning in red dirt communities 29 September 2015 CDU, Alice Springs			
10.	Community engagement: who is engaged and what for? 18 November 2015 NARU, Darwin			
11.	Power and pedagogy in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education: Why families and communities matter in pursuing educational justice 27 November 2015 UniSA, Adelaide			

S1.

Introduction, context and methods

Section 1 sets the scene for the rest of this book.

It places the RES project in context and discusses methods.

C1: Introducing red dirt thinking on remote education

C2: On data and how it was gathered



C1: INTRODUCING RED DIRT THINKING ON REMOTE EDUCATION

Chapter overview

This chapter very briefly introduces the Remote Education Systems (RES) project and the concept of what we called 'red dirt thinking'. Red dirt thinking is a way of approaching and solving problems. It is grounded in the local context and involves both creativity and innovation built on a foundation of the local context. Like 'blue sky thinking', it imagines a utopian array of possibilities, but differs in that solutions must incorporate the pragmatic realities of the 'red dirt'. As you read through subsequent chapters you will see red dirt thinking in action, applied to the many problems of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who live in remote (or 'red dirt') communities.

Key messages

- Red dirt thinking is a metaphor for the kind of thinking that holds utopian possibilities in one hand together with the pragmatic realities of the remote context in the other.
- Like 'blue sky', which expresses something of the vastness of possibilities, the 'red dirt' is ubiquitous across the very remote landscape—it extends as far as the eye can see.
- Red dirt thinking allows remote education stakeholders to be creative and innovative with ideas that are rooted in the local context.

About the Remote Education Systems project

The RES research was one of a number of projects that operated within the CRC-REP. The project commenced in July 2011 and was completed in June 2016. The aim of the project was 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.

The project was set against a background of many failed attempts to improve outcomes for students in remote communities. Among the many problems the research was designed to address were low retention rates through to Year 12, high rates of teacher turnover and inadequate pre-service teacher preparation for remote contexts.

The project was led by John Guenther (Flinders University) with senior statistician Chris Duncan (Northern Territory Government) 2011–2012, and senior researchers Melodie Bat (Charles Darwin University) 2012–2013, Sam Osborne (University of South Australia) 2011–2015 and Samantha Disbray (Charles Darwin University) 2013–2016.

red dirt

What is red dirt thinking?

When we think of innovation, we have come to know the concept of 'blue sky' thinking where we are able to dream about what might be possible without limitation or constraint, to let our ideas loose into the realms of possibility. As researchers in the RES project, in the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP), we commit to deep thinking and imagining as we conceptualise our collaborative research focus in remote Australia. This may be considered to be 'blue sky' thinking, but as we look to the pragmatic task of taking a first step, actioning the thinking, it is the red dirt beneath the feet that beckons an impression.

A key concern for the team was how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations, needs and aspirations. We hope to identify models and strategies that can improve students' learning outcomes so they increase their opportunities for meaningful livelihoods beyond school. A focus of the project was to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints in the research in order to inform actions and recommendations for systemic change.

In proposing the concept of 'red dirt' thinking, it was our intention to inform action in the remote education context. We hope to 'interrupt' (Ainscow 2005) established ways of thinking about the dialogue of power and pedagogy, systemic 'failings' and 'educational disadvantage'. As Boomer (1999) suggests, in order to shift disadvantaged students from the margins of educational disadvantage, 'pragmatic radical' educators must hold a sense of the utopian (blue sky) in one hand but retain a firm grasp on the pragmatic (red dirt) in the other.

What does the literature say?

Red dirt thinking is essentially a way of thinking about problems. In remote education, problems are seldom critically considered, and that is reflected in the way they are described. Education for students in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is often described as problematic, intractable (Wilson 2014), difficult to manage and resource (Ladwig & Sarra 2009) and failing (Hughes & Hughes 2012b).

In the light of 'red dirt thinking', we consider the 'problems' in a different way. If the problems were as simple as suggested by the above, then by now the magic formula for remote education would have been found. The realities in response to the above problem statements are a lot more nuanced than the authors suggest. For example, in a culture where independence at a young age is encouraged, the 'buck' does not stop with parents. And in relation to curriculum, in many remote schools the same basic content (based on the Australian Curriculum) is taught. If quality teaching was the problem, then why is it that quality teachers from high performing schools struggle in remote school environments? Then there is a question about what actually is meant by 'quality outcome'? Who decides what that is, and what exactly do they mean? In relation to jobs and money, what then happens when what motivates students is not the job and not the money? And finally, if school failure is the problem, what then does success look like?

By examining these questions from the perspective of those living in remote communities (that is, the 'red dirt'), the chances are we would end up with different answers. That is exactly what the RES project sought to do. In subsequent chapters we will attempt to unpack some 'red dirt' answers to the key challenges and problems of remote education. This may require us to think a little laterally. The common sense of some current solutions might need to be rethought.

Digging deeper

Osborne, S., & Guenther, J. (2013). Red Dirt Thinking on Aspiration and Success. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 88-99. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.17

[Access an Endnote reference library with all related RES publications](#)

Multimedia

Introductory video



Sam Osborne on accountability and the 'externally imagined' view of what's required in remote schools



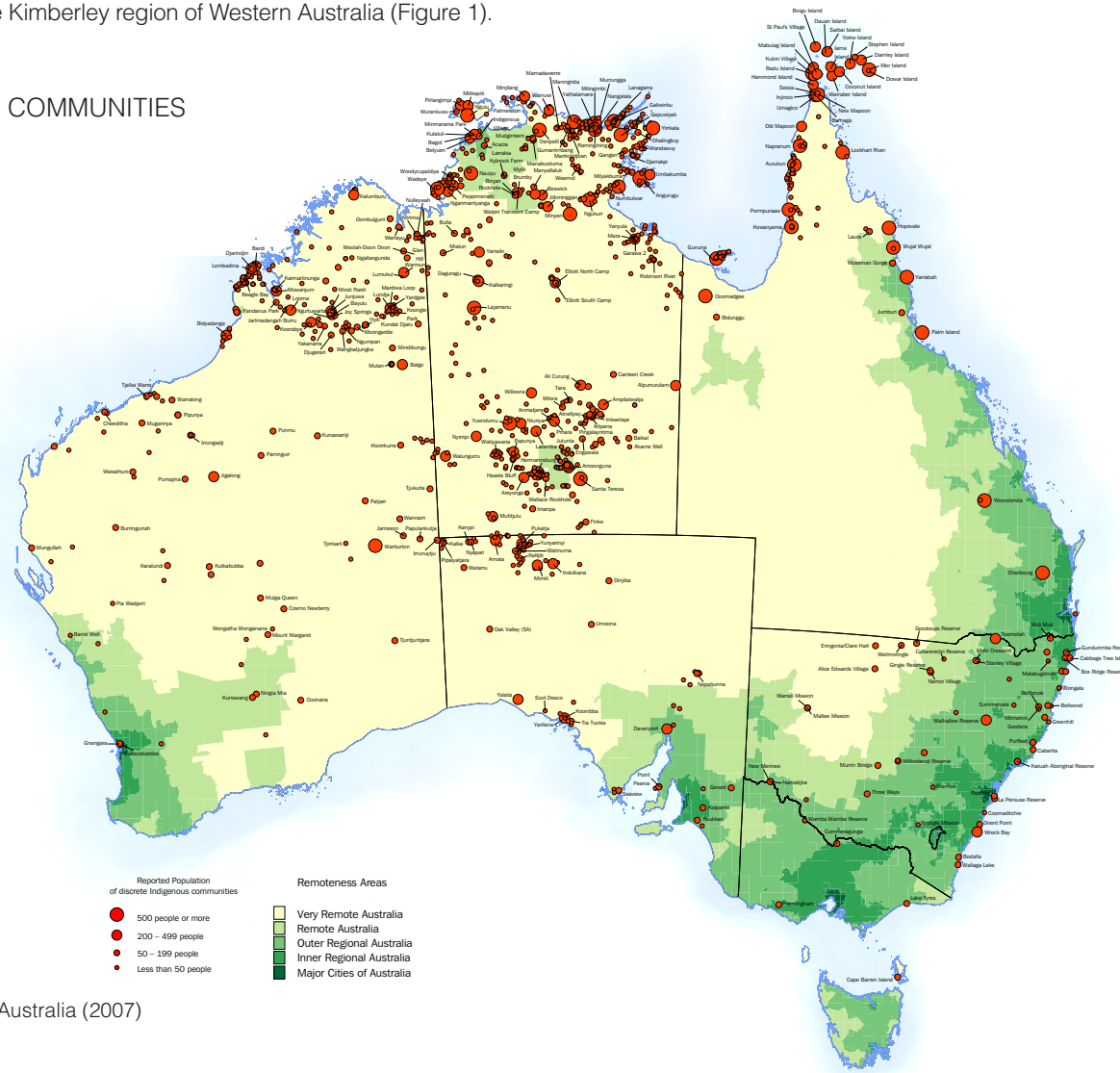
Introducing Red Dirt Thinking on remote education
(based on a talk given at the ISFIRE conference in Perth,
February 2013)



Info-graphics

When we talk about 'red dirt' communities, what do we mean? The following map, produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), may help to explain. The 'red dirt' communities we are most concerned with are those clustered around the far north of Queensland, the top end of the Northern Territory, those in central Australia and those in the Kimberley region of Western Australia (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: DISCRETE COMMUNITIES



Source: Commonwealth of Australia (2007)

C2: ON DATA AND HOW IT WAS GATHERED

Chapter overview

The RES project was designed to uncover ways that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples could gain better advantage and outcomes from the education that happens in and out of schools in their communities. It was designed to give voice to those living in communities and who belong to the country they live on.

The research used qualitative methods through interviews and focus groups. It also took into account quantitative data from publicly available data sources, such as the ABS and the My School website.

The primary concern of the research was to understand what was happening in what have been classified as 'very remote' locations by the ABS. The data for very remote and remote locations are quite different, and in most cases data from remote locations looks more like 'outer regional' data than 'very remote' data.

This chapter will be most useful for other researchers. It tells the story of how the RES project team gathered the data on which subsequent chapters are based.

Key messages

- The Remote Education Systems project ran over five years from 2011 to 2016.
- Over 1000 individuals contributed to the research.
- There was a strong focus on gathering the views of remote community members.
- One of the primary data-gathering tools was a series of focus groups which we called Thinking Outside The Tank sessions, with remote education stakeholders who came from across Australia.
- The project also drew on quantitative data sources: the ABS Census and the My School website.
- We had four research questions:
 1. What is education for in remote communities?
 2. What does success look like?
 3. How should teachers teach to that success?
 4. What would an effective system response look like?

Methodological approach

The methodology used in this research has been underpinned by a number of foundational (paradigmatic) assumptions. Our philosophical position coming into this research draws on a blend of constructivist/interpretivist and participatory paradigms (Lincoln et al. 2011). We acknowledge our position as non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander researchers in community contexts where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders are the primary users in the education system. This in itself creates a tension for us as researchers, where our goals include the promotion of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices (Guenther et al. 2015). We acknowledge the risks associated with attempting to portray remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints, as indicated by our research questions below. We also recognise that the process of analysis involves bias, because of our inherent non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander positions. That said, the three contributors who have worked on the project have extensive experience working with Aboriginal people in remote contexts, particularly in the Northern Territory and South Australia, where we have each worked for more than 10 years. Through processes of critical reflection together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and stakeholders, we attempt to ameliorate this risks associated with our positions as outsider researchers.

Research questions

Four research questions (RQs) underpin the research. Qualitative data collected from all sources have been examined for responses to these questions.

- 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?

Answers to these questions are offered in subsequent chapters as listed in Table 1. As can be seen, the bulk of the e-book content is focused on addressing change and system response.



TABLE 1: HOW THIS E-BOOK RESPONDS TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS & CONCERNS	ANSWERS & SOLUTIONS	OVERVIEW OF RESULTS GRAPHS
RQ1: What is education for?	Chapter 6: What is education for?	
RQ2: What is success?	Chapter 7: What is educational success?	
RQ3: How should teaching change?	Chapter 8: Red Dirt Curriculum Chapter 9: Teacher quality and qualities Chapter 10: Contextually and culturally responsive schools Chapter 11: Meeting language learning needs	
RQ4: System response?	Chapter 12: Workforce development Chapter 13: Community engagement Chapter 14: Boarding schools Chapter 15: Resourcing	
Cross-cutting issues	Chapter 3: Advantage and disadvantage of remote schools Chapter 4: Complexity in remote schools Chapter 5: Power and pedagogy	

Qualitative analysis methods and foundations

Qualitative data were collected during the period from mid-2012 through to the end of 2014. Sites for interviews and focus groups included Alice Springs, Adelaide, Yulara, Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Wadeye, Darwin, Perth, Broome and two online focus groups with participants coming in from across all Australian states except Tasmania (Figure 2).

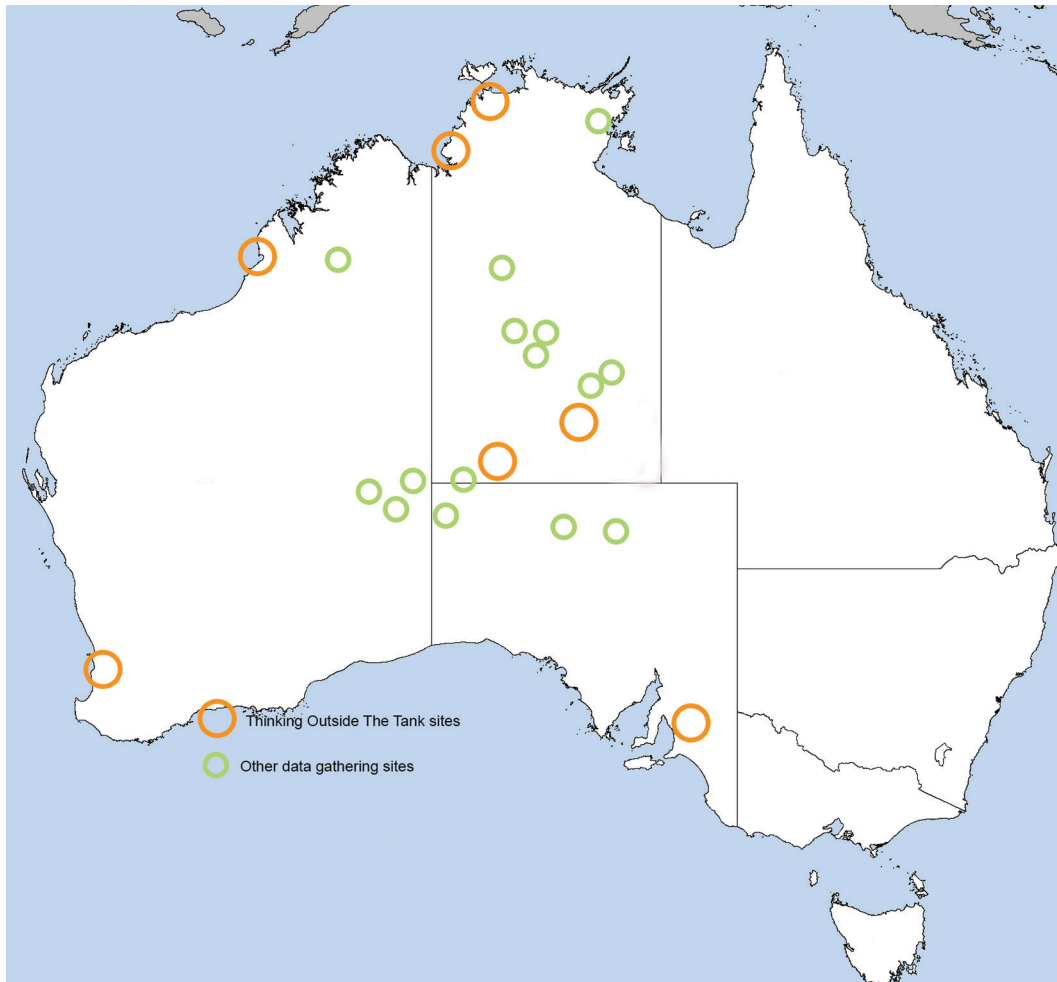
Data collected from the physical sites included interviews with participants from several communities across remote parts of Australia. We interviewed teachers, assistant teachers, school leaders, community members, policymakers, bureaucrats, university lecturers and researchers, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education students, youth workers, child care workers, education union members and representatives from non-government organisations (NGOs).

Data from all sources were incorporated into a single NVivo™ database. NVivo is qualitative data analysis software that allows ‘references’ (which could be images, text, audio or video) to be ‘coded’ (given a theme). The codes are represented in a hierarchical structure of parent and child ‘nodes’. Audio files created during interviews and focus groups were transcribed before being imported into the database for coding. Images of whiteboards and butchers paper and handwritten notes were scanned into the database. Electronic reports with secondary source data were also imported into the database.

The process of coding involved several steps; it is a highly interpretive task that requires considerable critical reflection. In the first instance the project team came together to conceptualise a coding structure built on the RQs. Some nodes were proposed at this time. Following this, the team worked on coding each document each member was responsible for. Additional nodes were created as required, consistent with a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz 2006, Denzin 2010). The team then came together for a two-day workshop to test

the structure and validate coding. Following this, the team finalised the coding of sources and moderated other team members' codes before coming together again for a further two-day workshop to rationalise the structure, check node content and consider implications of the data. The process was completed in February 2015.

FIGURE 2: DATA COLLECTION LOCATIONS



Quantitative data and analysis

While qualitative data is useful for showing how and why things occur, it does not tell us anything about the extent of issues or how long they have been happening, nor does it provide us with indications of relationships between variables. Quantitative data can also be helpful in gaining an understanding of a broader context. In the case of Census data, it covers all remote communities. Similarly, My School covers all remote schools. Both datasets are publicly available and relatively easy to access.

Census data has been largely used to build a picture of the context of remote education. The team's focus has been mostly on 'very remote' areas as they are classified in the Remoteness Structure of the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ABS 2011a). At one level the analysis was conducted for all of very remote Australia. At another, it was analysed for communities and regions where schools exist. The team used the ABS' **Tablebuilder Pro** online tool to determine intercensal trends and the relationship between one variable and others.

My School data reports school-level data for all schools across Australia. It has been developed as an accountability tool to report on measures prescribed by the Measurement Framework for Schooling (ACARA 2012a, 2015). Each Australian school has a page with information about attendance, National Assessment Plan—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores, staffing, finances, Indigenous population and socio-economic status (among other measures). Data from all very remote schools has progressively been added to a single database created in Microsoft Excel. This then allows for analysis using any of the variables contained in the dataset, for any of the years from 2008 to 2015, as long as data is recorded.

Data sources

The analysis draws on a range of data sources as tabulated below in Table 2. The largest amount of qualitative data comes from 45 focus groups and interviews with 250 remote education stakeholders. Some data are also extracted from reports of additional research conducted either by or for the RES project team. This includes an analysis of 31 very remote schools' Collegial Snapshots conducted by Principals Australia Institute and the Australian Council for Educational Research. These 10 documents do not include primary source data, but where reference is made to specific responses relevant to our research, they have been coded accordingly. The coding of data included a 'node' which identified references attributable to remote Aboriginal¹ stakeholders and made these references quantifiable. We defined these stakeholders as Aboriginal people who resided in and came from a remote location, as defined by the ABS (2011b) remoteness structure, or with a strong family connection to a remote location. In this report Aboriginal people from non-remote locations are included with remote and non-remote non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The reason for this distinction was to ensure that we were better reflecting the positions of remote Aboriginal people in the data.

TABLE 2: DOCUMENT SOURCES AND CODING REFERENCES

DOCUMENT SOURCE	ALL SOURCES	ALL CODING REFERENCES*	REMOTE ABORIGINAL REFERENCES*	NUMBER OF UNIQUE PARTICIPANTS
Interviews and focus groups	45	2501	523	250
Field notes and observations	12	111	0	0
Secondary sources/reports created by or for RES	10	856	603	~800 [†]
Butchers papers and whiteboards	20	197	0	0
Total	87	3665	1126	

* Includes coding references assigned outside of the RQs

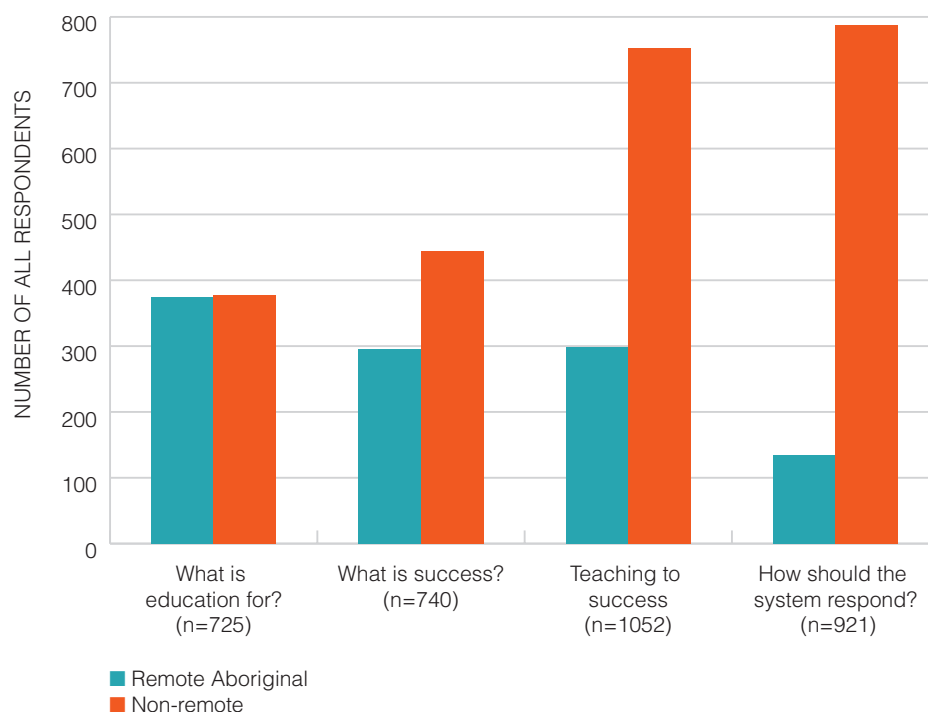
† Note that some survey reports used for this analysis did not detail the participant numbers

¹ To the best of our knowledge the data analysed does not include responses from Torres Strait Islander people.

Who contributed to what?

The analysis of qualitative data showed a difference in response rates among remote Aboriginal respondents and non-remote participants for each question, as shown in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3: CODING REFERENCES BY PARTICIPANT STATUS FOR EACH RQ



Introducing the 'Red dirt' team of researchers



John Guenther, principal researcher (2011–2016), has a strong history in research and evaluation. He has worked in the Northern Territory for more than 13 years. He currently lives in Darwin.



Samantha Disbray, senior researcher (2013–2016), is a linguist who has worked in remote education policy and delivery and on language planning and documentation, in particular with Central Australian languages Warlpiri, Warumungu and Wumpurrarni English. She lives in Alice Springs.



Sam Osborne, research fellow (2011–2015), is a former principal and remote educator in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands of South Australia. He currently lives in Adelaide.



Melodie Bat, senior researcher (2012–2013), is a former teacher and adult educator with experience in remote communities in the Northern Territory. She currently lives in Alice Springs.

Digging deeper

Guenther, J. (2014). Measuring the unmeasured in educational programs: filling in the blanks through evaluation. *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, 14(Special Issue: Evaluation), 204-222.

Guenther, J. (2015). *Conspiring to inspire community aspirations through remote education*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education annual conference, Fremantle. 30 November 2015. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/21013462/Conspiring_to_inspire_community_aspirations_through_remote_education

Guenther, J. (2015). *How can academia contribute to participatory methodologies for community engagement in the diverse cultural contexts of remote Australia?* Paper presented at the Australasian Evaluation Society NT Seminar Series, Darwin. 20 February 2015. Retrieved from http://www.covaluator.net/docs/S1.4_academia_participatory_evaluations.pdf

Guenther, J. (2015). *Overview of Remote Education Systems qualitative results*. CRC-REP Working Paper. CW025, Ninti One Limited. Retrieved July 2015 from http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/CW025_RemoteEducationSystemsQualitativeResults.pdf

Guenther, J., Galbraith, M., Moss, B., & Dhamarrandji, P. (2015). *Practice based best evidence: What evidence base counts when evaluating good practice in program delivery?* Paper presented at the AIFS Knowledge Circle Webinar Series. 28 April 2015. Retrieved from <https://www2.aifs.gov.au/cfca/knowledgecircle/news-events/practice-based-best-evidence-what-evidence-base-counts-when>

Guenther, J., Osborne, S., Arnott, A., & McRae-Williams, E. (2015). Hearing the voice of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training stakeholders using research methodologies and theoretical frames of reference. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 1-12. doi: 10.1080/13613324.2015.1110294

Video links

Watch a short video presentation that summarises
RES methodology



Watch a presentation on the challenges of research and
evaluation in remote contexts 'Practice-based best evidence'



S2.

Theoretical and philosophical constructs

This section sets the theoretical foundations of the RES project. On the one hand we show how traditional philosophical and theoretical approaches don't work, and on the other we show, from a theoretical perspective, what does.

C3: The advantaged and disadvantaged of remote schools

C4: Complexity in remote schools

C5: Power and pedagogy



C3: THE ADVANTAGED AND DISADVANTAGED OF REMOTE SCHOOLS

Chapter overview

This chapter explores 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-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 show that they 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.

Key messages

- 'Disadvantaged' is not how respondents described themselves.
- Measures of advantage and disadvantage are constructed from outside remote Australia.
- Attendance and academic performance are only very loosely connected.
- The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage does little to explain outcomes.

What does the literature say?

Disparity and gaps

One of the dominant 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-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on a range of indicators (see for example Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014). 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 2009a) 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-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of advantage, developing a sense of the 'Aboriginal problem' (Gorringe 2011). *Third*, the racialised 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).



Measures of disadvantage and deficit

Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report* (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014) points to a number of key indicators that represent the 'gap'. These are:

- lower school attendance and enrolment rates
- poorer teacher quality
- a lack of Indigenous cultural studies in school curricula
- low levels of Year 9 attainment
- low levels of Year 10 attainment
- difficulties in the transition from school to work.

The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report*, while not singularly focused on remote disadvantage, highlights the larger gap for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Further, it makes links from education to other areas of disadvantage: health, employment, early childhood development and the home environment. The Report paints what could be described as a very sad picture of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, a picture that on the whole (with the notable exceptions of mortality rates, home ownership, post-secondary outcomes, employment and income) does not appear to be getting much better. Again, the data should not be dismissed. It does have utility. Table 3, below, presents data from the Appendices of the report in relation to post-school qualifications. Here we see a gap of 24.2 percentage points in 2002 and 27.1 percentage points in 2008. The gap has widened.

TABLE 3: CHANGES IN PROPORTION OF 20–64 YEAR OLDS WITH NON-SCHOOL QUALIFICATIONS AT CERTIFICATE III OR ABOVE

PROPORTION OF 20–64 YEAR OLDS WITH NON-SCHOOL QUALIFICATIONS AT CERTIFICATE III OR HIGHER		
Remote*	2002	2008
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	14.4%	18.4%
Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	38.6%	45.5%

* does not include very remote as they were not shown for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population
Source: Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2011, Table 4A.7.4)

Measuring Australia's progress

The *Measures of Australia's Progress* consultation paper (ABS 2012b) acknowledges the significance of the rights of Indigenous peoples globally and the importance of taking these into account at a national level when considering Australians' aspirations. It also acknowledges issues of reconciliation, issues of disparity in terms of opportunity and the importance of equity and culture. It makes no attempt to distinguish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations from those of other Australians, which could be taken to mean that they are homogenous. However, it does attempt to identify issues of concern for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under thematic headings. The progress framework itself recognises diversity without following the pattern of other indicator frameworks that appear to focus on 'gaps' and disparities. Nevertheless, the

notions of 'progress' and aspiration as they are presented in the consultation and the existing headline indicators (ABS 2012c) continue to support the discourse by using lenses that assume uniformity and homogeneity of aspirations and outcomes across the nation.

Accessibility/Remote Index of Australia (ARIA)

Remoteness itself is seen as a disadvantage. An uncritical response would see some of the indexes as simply ways of classifying special geographies, but as we will see, these measures are not value free.

One index is the **Accessibility/Remote Index of Australia** (otherwise known as ARIA). Hugo et al. (2003) argue that ARIA is a positive development as a response to rural–urban stereotypes. This index categorises remoteness in terms of access to services on a scale from 0 to 12. The premise of this scale (which has since been adjusted to become ARIA+) is outlined in an occasional paper by the Department of Health and Aged Care in 2001:

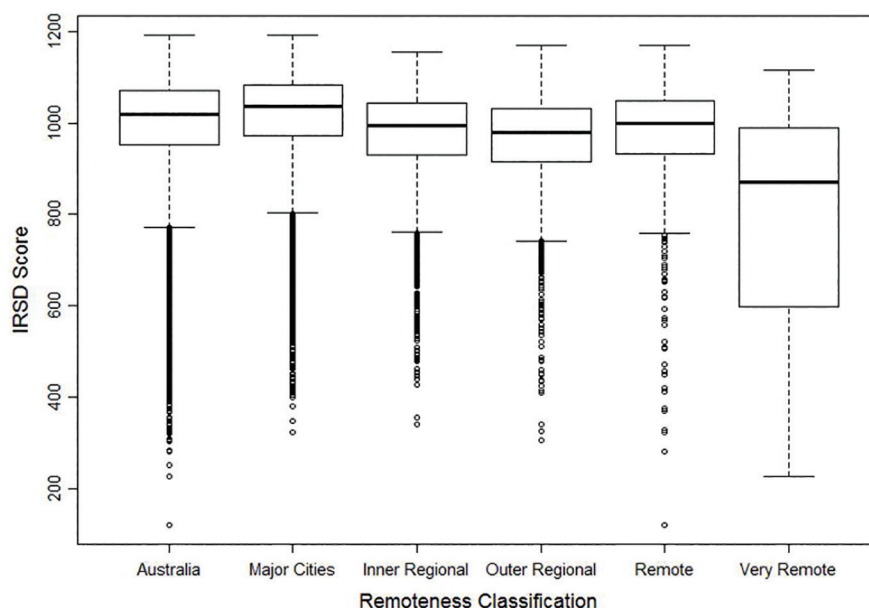
In order to systematically tailor services to meet the needs of Australians living in regional Australia, 'remoteness' (identified with lack of accessibility to services regarded as normal in metropolitan areas) needs to be defined. (DHAC 2001)

Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA)

On the surface this appears quite benign, as it seems reasonable to argue that more remote places have less access to services. The problem is that access, remoteness and disadvantage all go together when the measures of advantaged are constructed as they have been by the ABS and as they have in the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), as shown in Figure 4, below, which shows one of the indexes: the Index for Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage—even though the Principal Component Analysis of SEIFA does not include indicators of remoteness. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (2000b) explicated the complexities of this bundling together of apparently disparate elements that have such a powerful impact on life opportunities. Further, the *Dropping off the edge* report (Vinson et al. 2015) found 'In every [Australian] jurisdiction there is a marked degree of spatial concentration of disadvantage ... [and] One common feature across the jurisdictions was the prominence of disadvantaged localities in rural areas' (pp. 9 & 11). In Figure 4 below there is not a lot of difference between the plots for Inner Regional, Outer Regional and Remote areas, but what stands out is that Major Cities have the highest level of socio-economic advantage and Very Remote areas have by far the lowest. This representation reinforces a view that localities in rural, and particularly very remote, locations are inherently disadvantaged.



FIGURE 4: INDEX FOR RELATIVE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE



Source: ABS (2013, p. 68)

Index for Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)

In terms of components used to calculate the My School **Index for Community Socio-Educational Advantage** (ICSEA), the formula explicitly includes remoteness as an indicator of advantage such that:

$$ICSEA (student) = SEA (student) + student Indigenous status + SEA (school cohort) + Percent Indigenous student enrolment + Remoteness (ACARA 2013, p. 10)$$

Note also that the measure also includes an indicator related to indigeneity. This then means that by definition, Indigenous status and remoteness are included as indicators of *disadvantage*. The point is, that within an apparently objective measure of remoteness used to measure attributes of education we see values that directly label remoteness (or rurality) as the disadvantage. It is not that a consequence of being remote is to be disadvantaged, it is that one is more or less directly related to the other.

What does the RES evidence say?

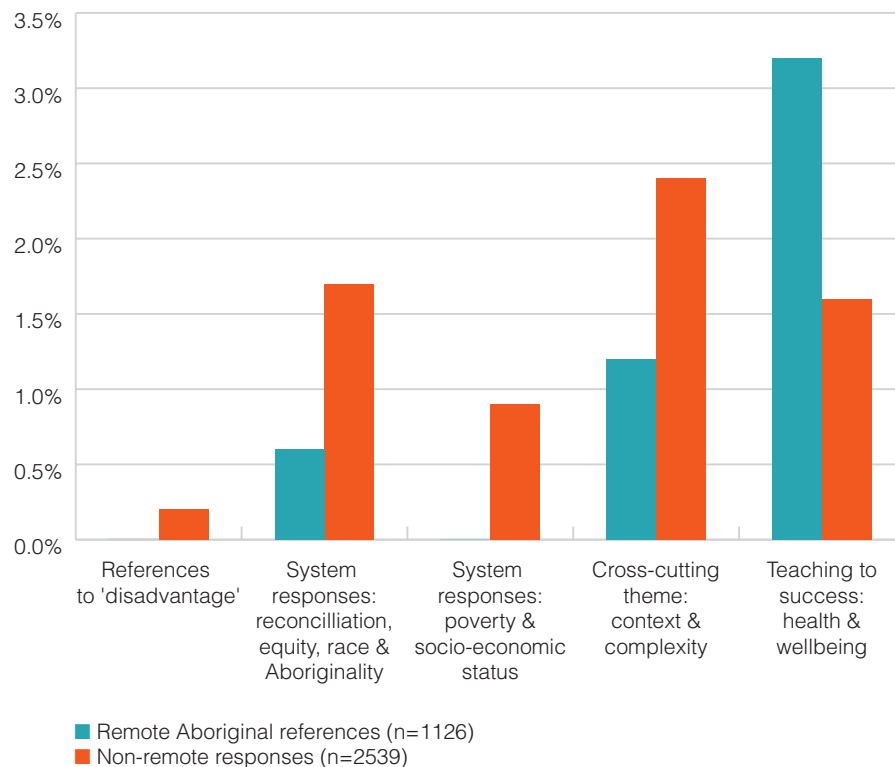
In our examination of qualitative data from the various sources (see **Chapter 2**), we looked for clues that might show how respondents saw disadvantage. In this presentation of data, we have separated out those who provide a 'remote Aboriginal' voice from the rest. The reason we have done this is to ensure that we answer the questions we had about the remote Aboriginal standpoint. We offer one caveat at this point. What our respondents said (or did not say) about disadvantage may not apply to all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

Do remote Aboriginal education stakeholders describe themselves as disadvantaged?

Figure 5 summarises the percentage of references and participants who discuss issues associated with what could be considered '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 but only 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—though again, relatively few remote Aboriginal respondents raised these concerns. Further, there was broad recognition (particularly among remote Aboriginal respondents) that the health and wellbeing of children both contributed to learning outcomes and need to be taken into consideration if teachers are going to teach successfully. However, respondents did not ask for this as a response to perceived 'disadvantage' but rather as an integral part of successful teaching.

FIGURE 5: REFERENCES TO EQUITY ITEMS IN THE RES QUALITATIVE DATA

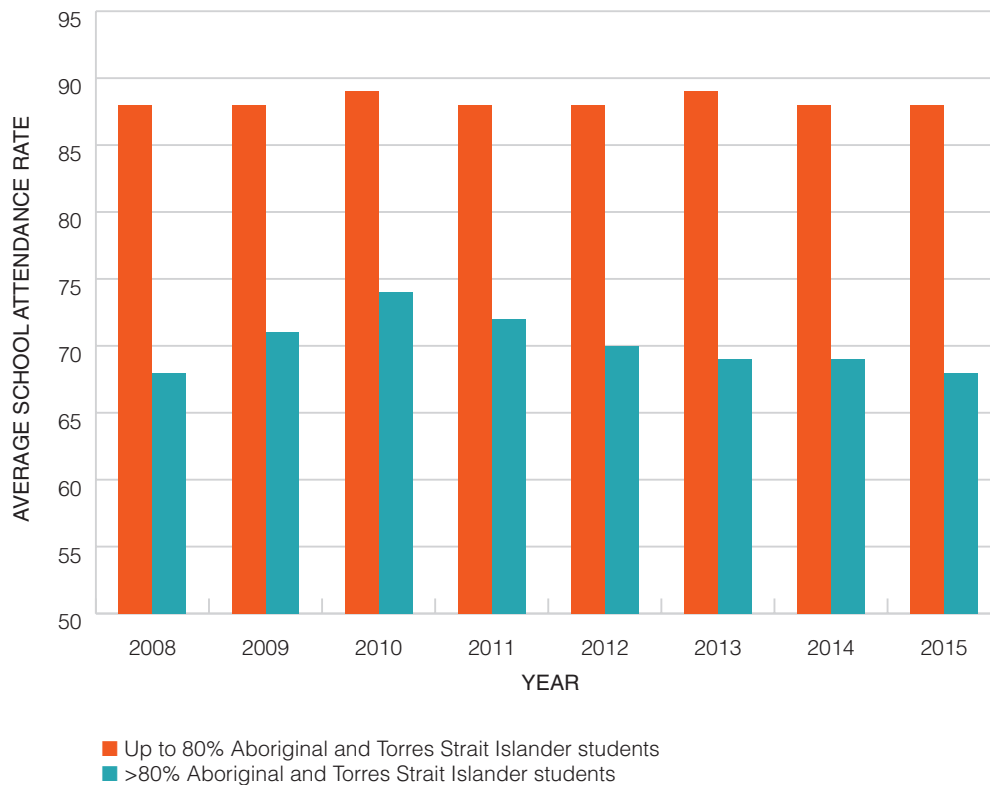


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Are remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait students disadvantaged?

As noted earlier (see *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*), one of the primary indicators used to describe relative advantage is a school's attendance rate. Overcoming disadvantage in this context would mean reducing the 'gap' between non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders in schools. As Figure 6 shows, the gap between the two groups is currently about 20%.

FIGURE 6: ATTENDANCE RATES FOR VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS WITH UP TO 80% AND ABOVE 80% ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS



Source: ACARA (2016)

Attendance is—according to the Productivity Commission, ACARA and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)—a key indicator of engagement in and benefit from schooling (ACARA 2015, Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014). 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 2015 were the same as they were in 2008. While the data shifts from year to year, in recent years the smallest gap was about 15% in 2010 and since then it has steadily increased. But does this widening gap itself suggest 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 perceive some advantage in what is on offer. It may also be that for some there is a perceived net cost associated with attending school, rather than a net gain (Field 2011, Lee & Anderson 2009, McRae-Williams & Guenther 2014).

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 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 English as a Second Language (ESL) skills and the need to be contextually responsive. 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 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 (e.g. through School Enrolment and Attendance Measure [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 'good life'. Our take on this is that the system needs help to overcome its own deficits or disadvantages in this regard.

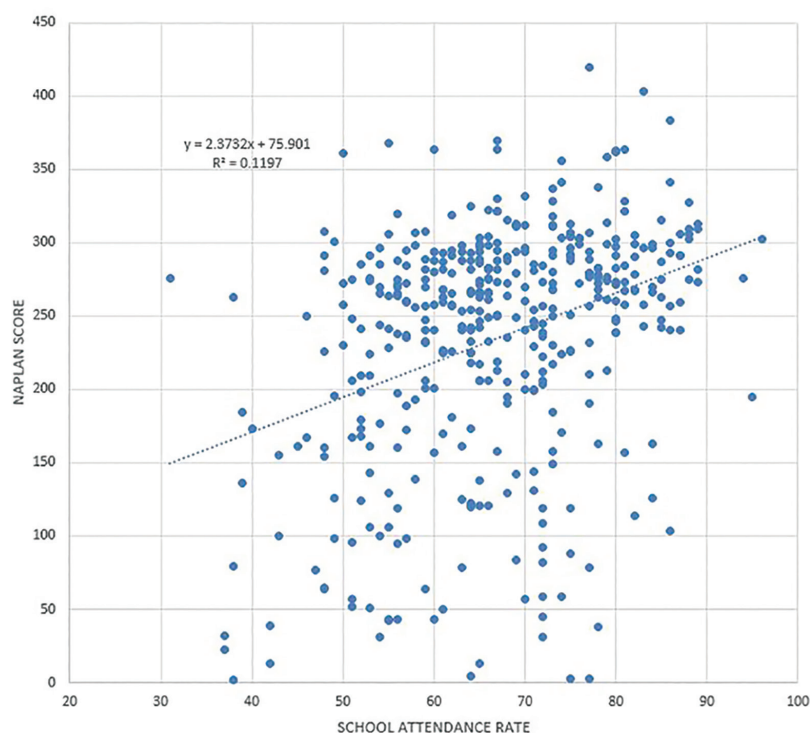
Does attendance make a difference to outcomes?

As a related aside, one of the key instruments of the hegemony is to attempt to enforce attendance compliance. This is built on assumptions that improving attendance should improve outcomes, both within school and beyond. It seems logical that higher levels of attendance should result in higher academic outcomes. But to what extent is this true? In a paper based on 2012 My School data (Guenther 2013a), we argued that attendance predicts as little as 10% of the change in student outcomes. We can now revisit that analysis with data from eight years of My School. The results shown in Figure 7, for the eight years, are very close to that suggested by the earlier analysis. Across the eight years, attendance predicts approximately 12% (as indicated by the R² value) of the change in Year 3 reading scores. Results for other NAPLAN reading and numeracy measures vary in the range between 10% and 20%.

Does 'disadvantage' make a difference to outcomes?

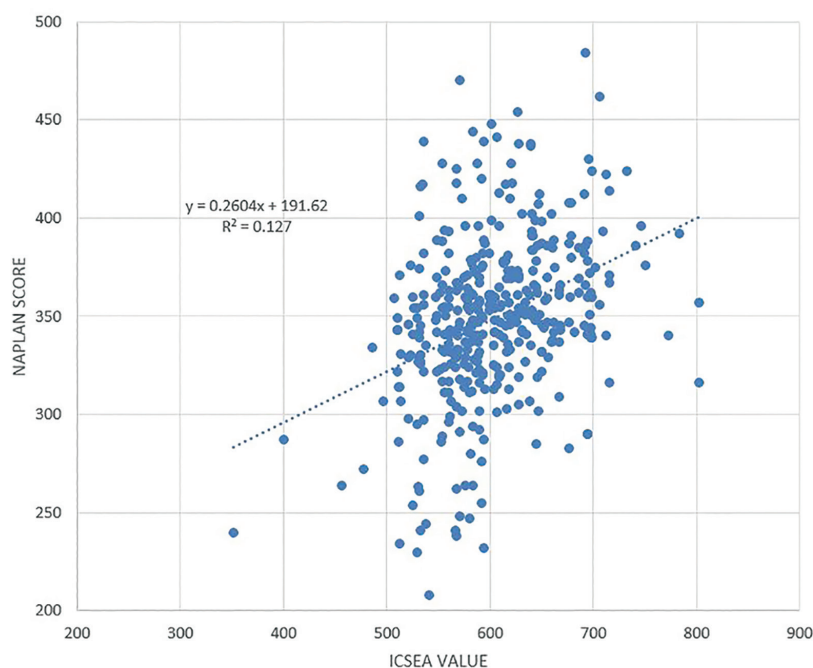
We noted earlier how ICSEA is constructed as an indicator of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. Across Australia, ICSEA is one of the strongest indicators of school performance. In the earlier paper (Guenther 2013a) we suggested that ICSEA predicts about 19% of the difference in NAPLAN scores. Again, taking the eight years together, we can see the impact over a longer period of time as shown in Figure 8. Over the longer period, the graph shows that ICSEA predicts just 13% of the change in NAPLAN scores. In other words, in remote schools with mainly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the externally devised indicators of disadvantage do little to explain variations in outcomes.

FIGURE 7: YEAR 3 NAPLAN SCORES VS. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES (2008–2015), VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS WITH >80% ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS



Source: My School data 2008–2016 (ACARA 2016)

FIGURE 8: YEAR 5 NAPLAN SCORES FOR NUMERACY VS. ICSEA (2008–2015), VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS WITH >80% ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS



Source: My School data 2008–2016 (ACARA 2016)

Digging deeper

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

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Guenther, J. (2015). Analysis of National Test Scores in Very Remote Australian Schools: Understanding the Results through a Different Lens. In H. Askeff-Williams (Ed.), *Transforming the Future of Learning with Educational Research* (pp. 125-143). Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.

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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., Bat, M., & Osborne, S. (2014). Red dirt thinking on remote educational advantage. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 24(1), 51-67.

Guenther, J., Halsey, J., & Osborne, S. (2015). From Paradise to beyond: Geographical constructs and how they shape education in the 'bush'. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 25(3).

Lovell, J., Guenther, J., & Zoellner, D. (2015). *Northern Australian Aspirations.* Issue 7, 2015, Charles Darwin University, The Northern Institute. Retrieved October 2015 from http://www.cdu.edu.au/sites/default/files/research-brief-2015-07_0.pdf



Lovell, J., Guenther, J., & Zoellner, D. (2015). *Now you see it; now you don't. Looking for the 'remote advantage' in the development of Northern Australia*. Paper presented at the Developing Northern Australia Conference 2015, Townsville. 20-22 July 2015. Retrieved

McRae-Williams, E. (2014). Aspirations for meaningful livelihoods: Challenges of pathway navigation. *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* (Special Edition), 17(4), 57-71.

McRae-Williams, E., & Guenther, J. (2012). *Pathways: following the highway, taking the scenic route or journeying through the dreaming*. Paper presented at the AVETRA 15th Annual Conference: The Value and Voice of VET Research for individuals, industry, community and the nation, Rydges Capital Hill, ACT. http://avetra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/McRae-Williams-Guenther_paper-no-20_final-submission.docx

McRae-Williams, E., & Guenther, J. (2014). *Learning Pathways for Economic Enterprise in Remote Aboriginal Communities: Are Certificate IIIs the ticket?* Paper presented at the AVETRA 17th International Conference, Surfers Paradise. 22-24 April 2013. Retrieved from <http://avetra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Abstract-151.pdf>

McRae-Williams, E., Guenther, J., Jacobson, D., & Lovell, J. (2016). What are the enablers of economic participation in remote and very remote Australia, and how can we identify them? *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts* [Special Issue: Synthesis & Integration] (19), 6-25. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18793/LCJ2016.19.02>

Multimedia links

Watch a short introductory video presentation on disadvantage



Watch a talking PowerPoint from Lecture #2 on the advantaged and disadvantaged of remote schools



John Guenther discusses one important learning about the nature of learning in remote communities



Listen to a 2012 presentation with a PowerPoint that discusses the problem with the link between attendance, disadvantage and outcomes



red dirt

C4: COMPLEXITY IN REMOTE SCHOOLS

Chapter overview

The dominant discourse surrounding education for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students uses a language of deficit, disadvantage and failure. Analysis of the CRC-REP's Remote Education Systems (RES) project data challenges the validity of these descriptors on the basis that stakeholders of remote schools do not describe education in this way. How then do they describe it? Analysis of the data suggests that many stakeholders describe education in terms of complexity framed by the challenges associated with an array of student, family, community, cultural, school and teacher/teaching factors.

In this chapter the proposition of 'complexity' in remote education is considered in the light of complexity theory. While education systems generally have been described as 'complex', the term may be more apt for remote education systems. Their tendency to operate balanced 'on the edge of chaos and order', the unpredictability of their behaviour, the array of elements in the systems, and the way the systems co-evolve with their environments all point to a neat fit with the idea of 'complex adaptive systems'.

Given this fit, what might the implications for strategic policy be? Attempts to shift the system through means that are best suited to simple or even complicated systems where inputs, outputs and outcomes are relatively predictable have been tried over and over in recent years, but to little effect. The RES data provides clues as to why this is so and indeed what could be done differently if, in strategic policy terms, the system was treated as a complex adaptive system.

Key messages

- Complexity theory helps explain the dynamics of schools in remote communities.
- Simple solutions for complex problems do not work.
- When working with complex systems, all the system elements must be considered.
- Interventions in remote education have failed to a large extent because they have not taken into account the complexity of the system.
- Drivers within remote education systems would approach education differently if they recognised the complexity they were working with.

What does the literature say?

Complexity theory has its origins in systems science (Flood & Carson 1993). A system, by definition, is a collection of elements that behave as a whole. Complex systems can be contrasted with **complicated, simple and chaotic systems** using Snowden's (2011) **Cynefin Framework** (Figure 9), as a graphical representation of different kinds of systems:

FIGURE 9: CYNEFIN FRAMEWORK



Simple systems are ordered with predictable cause and effect outcomes. Complicated systems do have a relationship between cause and effect, but require expert analysis because of the number of possibilities available. In complex systems the cause and effect processes are intertwined with non-linear and unpredictable relationships. In chaotic systems, there is no relationship between input and output, and gaining more data or information about the problem or an intervention designed to address the problem won't necessarily help solve the chaotic problem (Head 2008).

Beyond these distinctions, complex systems have a large number of elements that are networked in multiple ways and which interact on a continuing basis. Relationships co-evolve in complex 'adaptive' (as opposed to determined) systems; they are self-organising, and recognisable patterns emerge from the interactions. Complex adaptive systems will tend towards maximum entropy—or disorder—unless they receive energy from their environment. They are 'balanced between order and anarchy, at the edge of chaos' (Dodder & Dare 2000, p. 3).

Complexity theory's application has spread beyond its systems science origins to other disciplines, including economics (McGregor 2012) and socio-ecological systems (Levin et al. 2013). It has been used to solve wicked policy problems (Head & O'Flynn 2015), to explain the dynamics of communities of practice in organisations (Callahan & Milne 2004), organisational leadership (Schneider & Somers 2006), strategy development (Hammer et al. 2012) and how research and evaluation methodology can be applied in complex contexts (Hawe et al. 2009, Rogers 2008, Westhorp 2012). In the field of education, complexity theory has been applied to educational philosophy (Mason 2008) and as a theory of education itself (Davis & Sumara 2010).

Snyder (2013), writing for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) considered educational reform through a complexity lens. He notes, based on parallels with complex ecologies of food webs, that 'influence on any given node ... rarely extends beyond two or three degrees of separation from any other node' (p. 15). He goes on to suggest that policy interventions should target particular 'nodes' (rather than multiple nodes) where system-wide impact is achieved through a ripple effect. While this may be all well and good, in a 'closing the gap' environment, it raises questions about whether or not it is possible to intervene more quickly to shift a complex adaptive system. Boal and Schultz (2007) suggest that leaders in complex organisations do play an important role in shifting systems, but that it takes time and a constant

narration of the organisation's vision and purpose. There isn't much comfort in this for those trying to work with Australia's remote education systems. Nor is there much comfort in this for those determined to shift systems by command and control approaches, or where the logic of improvement is reduced to achievement of narrow performance targets. But this is exactly what current strategic policy attempts to do, despite repeated failure. In the UK, Bates (2012, p. 52) comments that 'policy-makers seem to spend a lot of time at the design board, abstracting and simplifying in an attempt to control the complexity that often defies centralised control'. In contrast, the way policy should work in complex systems (including remote education systems) is to garner the knowledge and resources of those embedded within the systems to effect the kind of change that evolves or emerges (Brown 2010, Hazy & Uhl-Bien 2015).

What does the evidence say?

In our analysis of RES qualitative data, we found some recurring themes that did not necessarily fit any single research question theme. Respondents often spoke about the complexity of the context, the multiple elements they had to work with and the interactions between these contexts and system elements. Within our data we found 81 references to complexity described in this way. These are represented in Table 4.

TABLE 4: DESCRIPTORS OF COMPLEXITY IN REMOTE SCHOOLS FROM BOTH REMOTE ABORIGINAL AND NON-REMOTE STAKEHOLDERS (N=81)

SYSTEM ELEMENT	THEME	KEY POINTS & DESCRIPTIONS
Family context	Family dynamics	Competing family priorities and pressures, family responsibilities, parenting, intergenerational change
Social context	Social issues	Fighting, kids wandering around at night, shame, housing, teasing, thrill of violence, poverty
	Substance abuse	Alcohol and drugs
	Mobility	Movement in and out of towns
	Mistrust	Lack of trust in institutions
Student context	Students and agency	Not just about presenting behaviours, students make choices, 'boss of the parents'
	Student health and wellbeing	Health, suicide, safety
Cultural context	Cultural priorities	Death and funerals, cultural differences, law and ceremonies
	Language and identity	Multiple languages, English language acquisition
	Purpose of school	No reason to engage
	Cultural change	'Halfway between nowhere'
School context	Teachers and teaching	Multiple roles and responsibilities, relationships with community, experience, professional standards, misunderstanding of context
	Stress and frustration	Teacher burnout
	Flexibility	Need for adaptability and flexibility
Policy context	Policy environment	Policy doesn't recognise complexity, inability to respond to unique situations, tensions for policymakers
	Resourcing	Funding cycles, uncertainty, available human resourcing
	Welfare	Disincentives, stigma of work, expectations of youth allowance payments
	Racism	Lack of support for Aboriginal teachers
	Disconnected services	Agencies not working together, lack of integration

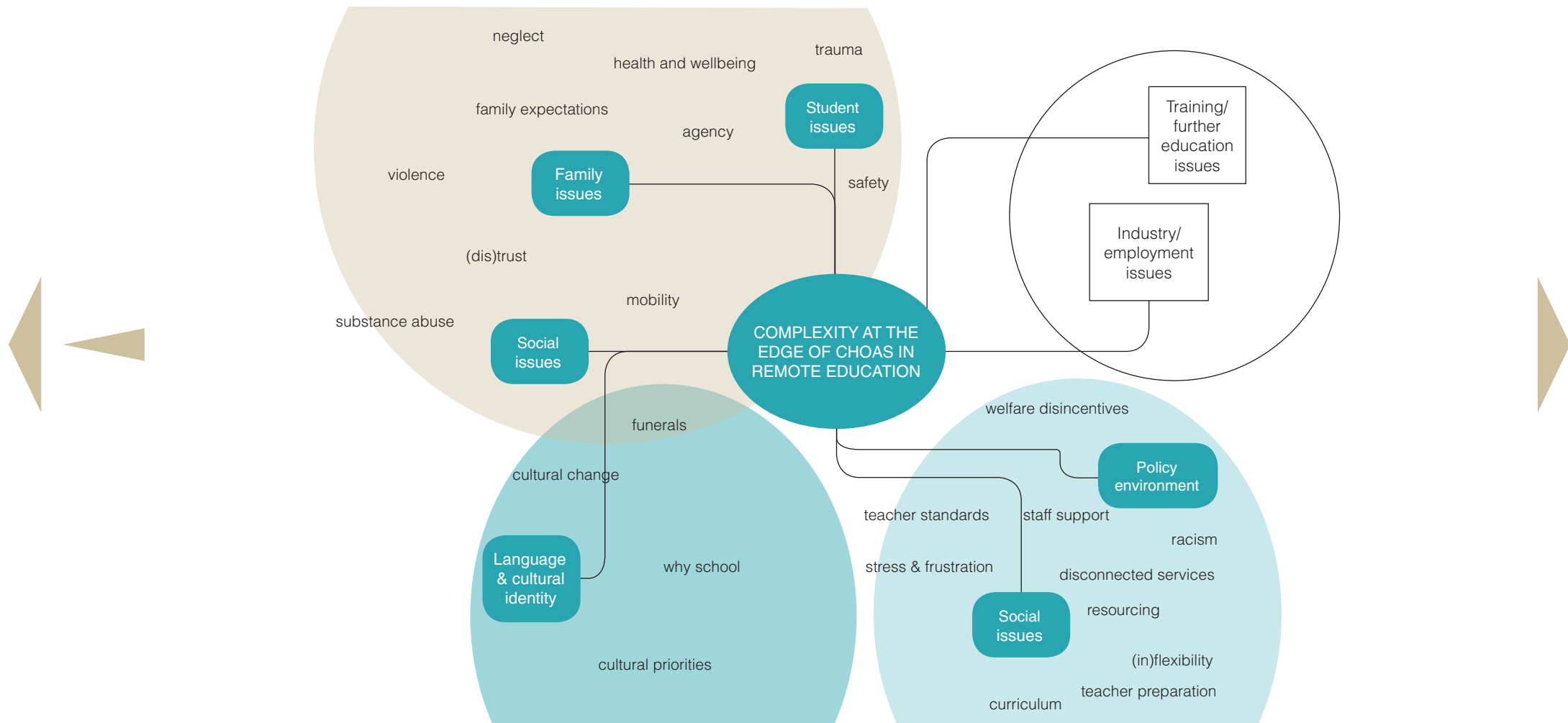
But before we get too carried away with the breadth of elements associated with what appear to be complex systems, let's just consider for a moment who is making these assertions. Of the 81 responses coded to the themes identified in the table, 67 came from non-remote stakeholders. In other words, while systems are complex for non-remote stakeholders, remote Aboriginal stakeholders do not see them the same way. This should not come as a surprise. The bulk of remote Aboriginal stakeholders don't see issues like cultural priorities, language, student agency or family issues as being unusual, different or complex. Rather, they are normal parts of daily life. So to be clear, the systems are complex not because remote Aboriginal stakeholders make them so; rather, systems are complex because non-remote stakeholders operate in contradictory paradigms that don't fit the remote context.

What is perhaps more interesting is the absence of system elements or agents. If we see remote education as part of the broader economic and social landscape, we should perhaps see elements associated with what would normally be beyond school, for example industries, employers and post-school training providers, and perhaps higher education providers. They are included in the diagrammatic representation of the data in Figure 10. But in their discourse, stakeholders did not mention employers, trainers, or pathways beyond school as adding to complexity or being particularly problematic. Those parts of the system just weren't on their radar.

If we align the characteristics of complex adaptive systems mentioned earlier with the observations we have made in the data, we can see quite a bit of congruence. *Firstly*, there is a large number of system elements that all interact with each other at multiple levels. At the interface of education in schools, the daily interactions (described in the data) occur regularly with teachers, students, families, cultures, communities, school leaders and the policy environment. These elements don't necessarily share a common purpose (or language), which leads to feelings of stress and frustration, particularly among teachers, who try to keep chaos at bay. *Secondly*, the patterns that emerge from these interactions are recognisable almost anywhere in remote Australia. They include patterns of truancy, teacher turnover, health and wellbeing issues, competing cultural priorities, violence and mobility and student agency. *Thirdly*, when we consider the systems as holistic entities they don't behave the way simple systems do with predictable cause and effect linear logic. This point leads us to ask why past interventions in remote education have seemingly failed (Wilson 2014).



FIGURE 10: REPRESENTATION OF THE ELEMENTS OF REMOTE EDUCATION SYSTEMS



Implications: why have remote education interventions failed?

There are some practical implications that arise from this understanding of complexity. It helps us understand why policy interventions often fail, and it helps us to consider how system stakeholders who drive strategy might respond differently.

Whether we consider strategies that are designed to improve attendance, improve academic outcomes, improve retention rates or improve transition to further education and training, the overwhelming conclusion that I draw from the evidence from research and evaluation is that nothing has worked particularly well. Why is this so?

They assume simple causal pathways that don't exist

For example, these strategies assume that increasing attendance could be achieved by applying pressure through the welfare system. Or that improved attendance will lead to better academic outcomes. **Or perhaps they assume that school leads to employment, enterprise or some form of economic participation.** This is then reflected in simplified complex problems, such as 'getting children to school, adults into jobs, and making communities safer' (Australian Government 2015, p. 1).

They make assumptions about the system that aren't shared by local people

For example, these strategies may assume that the system is disadvantaged (see **Chapter 3: The advantaged and disadvantaged of remote schools**) when locals don't share the same understanding of advantage and disadvantage. Similarly, locals and non-locals do not share notions of **success and aspiration** (Osborne & Guenther 2013).

They fail to take account of all the elements of the system

RES data shows that the assumed connection between school and work is absent from discourse of those at the coal face. Respondents did not talk about employers at all. Similarly, expectations of training and further education as a follow-on from school don't exist.

They compete against other interventions that may work against system change

For example, in Snyder's (2013) terms, hope of a ripple effect is dashed by other interventions that bombard the system using other entry points. National Partnership programs were a good example of how this happens at a strategic policy level. Multiple interventions are applied to multiple components of the system, and because of the multiple causal pathways from the intervention to the system we can never be sure what impact any of the interventions had (see Atelier Learning Solutions 2012).

They often assume that the impact of interventions will work 'simply'

For example, in one recent attempt in South Australia, an intervention was designed to increase the days children spent at school with the simple logic that more time at school leads to more learning, which leads to better outcomes. Similarly, truancy programs often work on the assumption that good outcomes will automatically flow from getting kids to school. As noted earlier, simple logic does not work in complex systems.

They fail to take into account the system's tendency to maximise entropy

Some interventions, like the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) program, which threatens welfare cuts for parents who fail to send their kids to school, assume that behaviour changes will be sustained because the threat remains. But when program staff leave, the behaviours return to where they were. This kind of intervention temporarily decreases the entropy of the system within the local context, but only temporarily while resources are applied. The moment the pressures are withdrawn, the entropy of the local system increases and it returns close to its pre-intervention state—a state which, to outsiders, looks like disorder.

They fail to acknowledge the connections within the system

While our respondents identified most of the elements of complex remote education systems as discrete elements, they failed to see how they are linked together. With some exceptions, we saw many interventions designed for delivery within the silos of the bounded areas, represented by the circles in Figure 10. For example, programs that are designed to improve literacy and numeracy at school (such as **Quicksmart**, **Accelerated Literacy**, **Literacy Scaffolding**, **Reading Recovery** or phonics programs such as **Thrass**) mostly operate within the classroom and take little account of the broader context of the student.

Even where interventions are designed to be collaborative, they are mostly focused on one aspect of collaboration, such as service delivery (excluding service use). Inter-organisational collaboration is not enough to effect the kinds of change needed to shift education systems in remote communities (see for example Guenther & McRae-Williams 2015).

red dirt



Implications: If remote education systems were recognised as ‘complex’ what would we do differently?

Given the above, how could remote education system decision-makers respond differently? Below, we discuss four ways that may help.

Take account of uncertainty and unpredictability

One approach often used to deliver services better and more efficiently in educational or social interventions is to apply evidence-based best practice. Best practice assumes that simple systems with linear and predictable logic are at play. The **Cynefin Framework** suggests (Snowden 2011) that in complex systems, **emergent practice is what we should be looking for** rather than best or good practice. Emergent practice allows for experimental, novel and unique approaches. In complex systems, one-size-fits-all approaches don't work. Randomised control trials will not work. Complex systems are inherently unpredictable. They require creative and novel approaches.

Engage all system elements with collaborative and adaptive leadership

We noted earlier that ‘collaboration’ tends not to be sufficient in itself to achieve better outcomes in complex social environments. Most often this is because those who collaborate tend to have a common purpose (e.g. educational service providers), so while they may work together well, they miss an important element of working in complex systems, which is to work with those who don't have a common purpose. Head and Alford (2013) suggest that:

[Adaptive leadership] deals with diversity by involving multiple parties in a manner that not only brings out their differential knowledge but also enables the surfacing of contending values and interests, and dialogue between those in whom they reside. (p. 20)

Effective collaboration, in a complex environment, means working across the elements of the system. So in the model I presented earlier, for school leaders it means working with staff at the school, families and students, cultural leaders or elders, policymakers, employment services and training providers. Such **leaders act in a complex environment as ‘collaborative capacity builders’** (Weber & Khademian 2008), drawing from and building the collective knowledge of all those within the system.

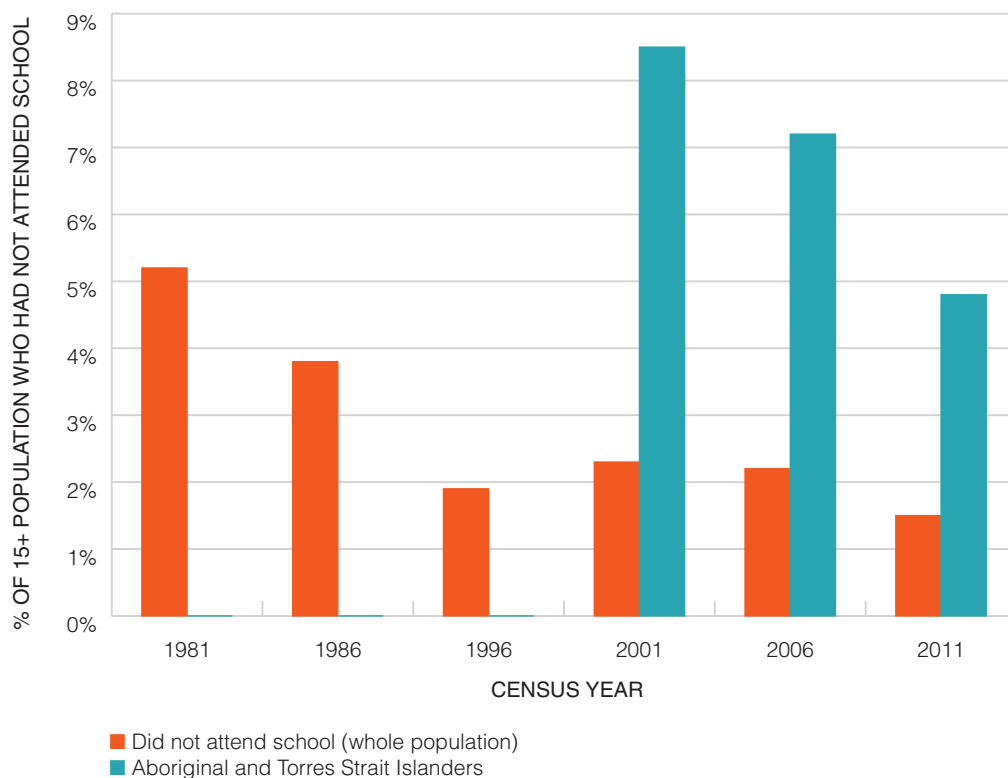
Practice processes of collective inquiry

Given what I've just said, complex systems require different analytical tools and processes than simple ones. Data about the systems needs to draw on collective knowledge from individuals, communities, organisations and, in the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Indigenous knowledge systems. Brown (2010) describes a transdisciplinary approach to collective inquiry that a) identifies the range of worldviews involved, b) establishes the validity of evidence that these knowledges can provide, c) creates conditions that foster creativity, and d) develops strategies that allow for all contributing knowledges to share possible actions for the future. In short, what this means is that knowledge generated for problem-solving in complex systems requires contributions from all stakeholders. In remote contexts, it **requires a repositioning of the researcher and the research to take into account all stakeholders’ standpoints** (see Guenther et al. 2014c). It requires respectful dialogue and listening. See Chapter 5: Power and pedagogy for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

Narrate a shared vision over time

History matters. Not because we need to dwell on it, but because it defines a story of the past that connects us with the present and the future. As noted earlier (Boal & Schultz 2007), leaders have a role in creating and re-articulating a narrative over time. This might seem frustrating when time is seemingly short. **But in complex systems, time is an important factor in change.** Consider Figure 11 below, which shows the proportion of people aged 15 and over who have never attended school in the Northern Territory. While system decision-makers lament the slow progress of change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, the chart shows that for the Northern Territory at least, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who had not attended school almost halved between 2001 and 2011. Compared to other jurisdictions, 5% of a particular population group not having been to school sounds appalling. But the point is, change has happened. It is happening. And it is probably because of the repeated narrative about the importance of schooling, which is now being re-narrated by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The system has shifted, maybe not fast enough for our liking, but it has shifted nevertheless.

FIGURE 11: PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE AGED 15+ WHO HAD NEVER ATTENDED SCHOOL AT CENSUS POINTS, 1981 TO 2011 FOR THE NORTHERN TERRITORY



Sources: ABS Census publications (ABS 1983, 1989, 1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2012a)

Note that in 1981, the publicly available Census information did not show numbers of those who did not attend school. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data is not available prior to the 2001 Census.

Digging deeper

Bat, M., & Guenther, J. (2013). Red Dirt Thinking on Education: A People-Based System. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 123-135. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.20

Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2015). Building on 'Red Dirt' Perspectives: What Counts as Important for Remote Education? *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 44(2), 194-206. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jie.2015.20>

Guenther, J., McRae-Williams, E., & Kilgariff, C. (2014). *Engineering Employment Pathways in Remote Communities and the (false) hope of Collaborative Service Provision*. Paper presented at the NARU Public Seminar Series, Darwin. http://naru.anu.edu.au/__documents/seminars/2014/john_guenther_collaboration_paper.pdf

Ninti One Limited. (2015). *Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: Submission 6*, October 2015. Retrieved May 2016 from <http://www.apf.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=068a3843-b808-4ec9-b373-dacbb0cfcc50&subId=405055>

Multimedia links

View a short introduction to this topic here



Watch a talking PowerPoint based on Lecture #3, Complexity and chaos in remote education, or read the accompanying paper



Brief video illustrations of simple, complicated and complex systems



C5: POWER AND PEDAGOGY

Chapter overview

This chapter gives some background on the nature of historical and continuing unequal power in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and suggests a few key ideas that are useful in thinking about how institutions, researchers, educators and remote communities might begin to renegotiate this relationship in informing remote education practice. This is not to perpetuate ideas of remote Aboriginal communities being behind, somehow lesser or incapable. The chapter considers Western education, which is ordered and resourced by government policy, informed by research and enacted largely by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. In this context, remote communities lack the delegated authority to make decisions about how education might strengthen local aspirations and, by and large, resources remain controlled by the institutions of government.

The chapter is based on a **lecture given by Sam Osborne on this topic**. Sam completed a Bachelor of Teaching in 1996 and a Bachelor of Education in 1997 at UniSA, majoring in Aboriginal Education, including three semesters of Pitjantjatjara language under the tuition of the late Bill Edwards and Mrs Tur, along with Sandra Ken and Mrs Kunmanara Ken. He worked in Adelaide-based schools teaching Pitjantjatjara language, among other things, before heading to Ernabella Anangu School in 2002 where he took a Junior Secondary class before working as Deputy Principal and Principal until 2008. He began working in research and evaluation projects, also working as an interpreter for a number of boards, including Nyangatjatjara Aboriginal Corporation and the Central Land Council's Uluru Rent Money Community Development program, working with Traditional Owners and communities in the southern region of the Northern Territory. While he is now based in Adelaide, he remains passionate about Anangu education, particularly in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands of South Australia.

Key messages

- Power-sensitive dialogue is needed to understand the limitations of simplistic policy assumptions and to negotiate alternatives within the local community context.
- Institutions have an ethical responsibility to listen to the voices of remote community members.
- Remote Aboriginal education stakeholders must act to provide voice and understandings of aspiration to other system stakeholders.

What does the literature say?

Current policy approaches resource school attendance officers and, in the case of the **School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM)**, there are levers for cutting welfare benefits to parents of children who are not attending regularly (Martin 2014, Wright et al. 2012). We know these programs don't actually achieve lasting change in attendance. The SEAM evaluation shows that while parents are humbugged by the truancy officers, the kids will go to school. The moment the officers go away, things go back to normal. Power-sensitive dialogue is needed to understand the limitations of simplistic policy assumptions and to negotiate alternatives within the local community context.

Lisa Delpit describes the process of ethical 'listening' across points of epistemological and ontological difference as 'painful', urging educators that:

[T]o do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue.
(Delpit 1993, p. 139)

It is difficult for educators and education systems, anchored as they are in their own epistemological, ontological and axiological foundations, assumptions and experiences of the world, to come to terms with the needs and context of what Delpit (1993) calls 'educating other peoples' children'. Simply reproducing what makes sense in a Western, urban, middle-class education consigns Indigenous peoples and other minority communities the world over to claims for recognition (Fraser 2001). That is, they are left with the single request asking institutions of power to recognise their right to retain distinct and unique epistemologies, languages and identities and to recognise that these identities are worthy of being sustained rather than erased through the education process.

Makinti Minutjukur (in Minutjukur & Osborne 2014, p. 19) expresses a 'willingness to embrace the ... power that [Western] education offers, but ... emphasize[s] that this is not a case of "cut and run"'. She goes on to say that 'As Anangu, we have our own power that we wish to retain and this power is to be carried forward in the pursuit of the power that education offers' (p. 19).

red dirt

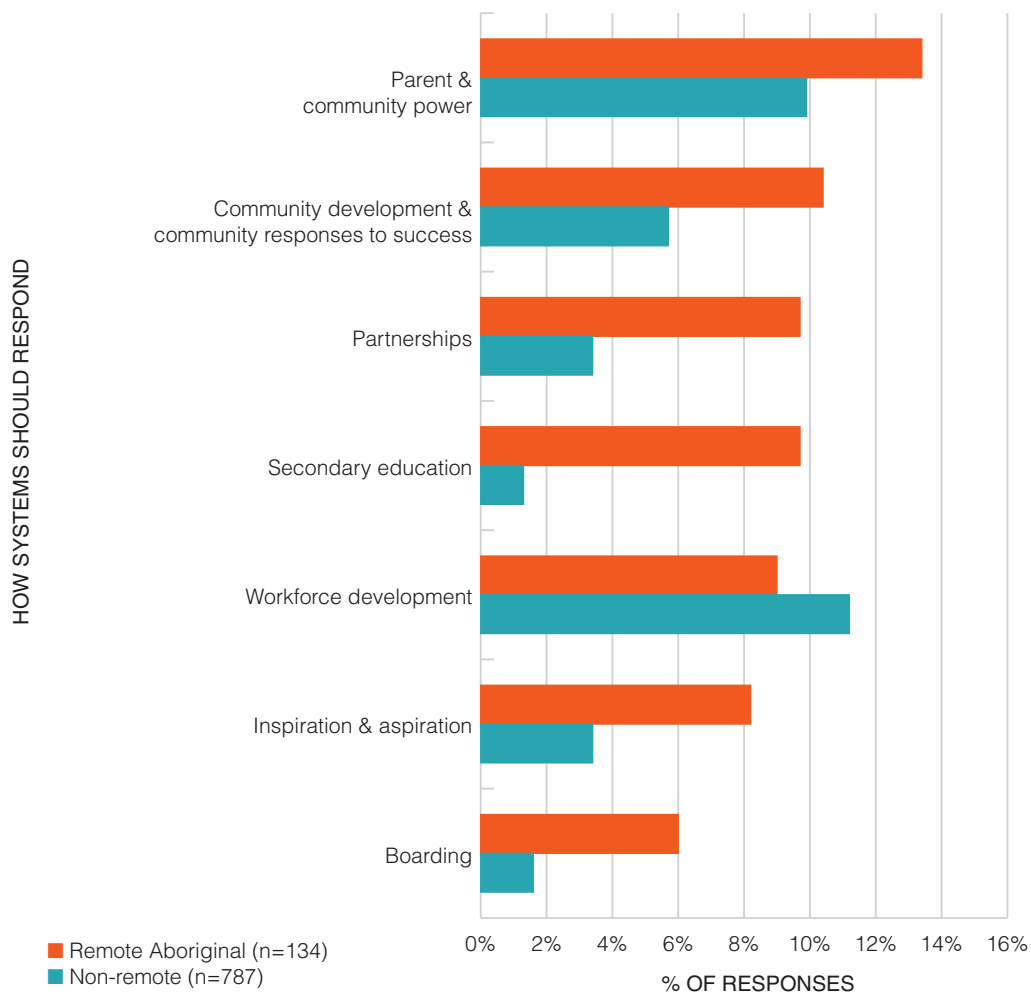


What does the RES evidence say?

RES data supports the views expressed in the literature, although there are some differences between remote Aboriginal responses and non-remote responses. Data on how respondents think systems should respond are shown in Figure 12 (see also [Section 4](#) for more details). Our main concern is about what local community people think, so we have ordered the chart to show their priorities. Their responses suggest that firstly it is important for parents and community members to have 'power'. Respondents discussed the importance of building relationships with community, community (including school) empowerment, supporting community engagement, parental responsibility, local autonomy, giving parents choices and parents participating in planning. The bar labelled 'community developmental and community responses to success' was conceptually connected to the 'parent and community power' node. There were important distinctions though. Community developmental approaches included those which listened to community expectations, were empowering, built a shared language, took time, and which recognised the incongruence in values between community and the 'system'.

Among non-remote respondents, the most frequently discussed topic was 'workforce development'. This covered an array of workforce issues, including undergraduate teacher programs, recruitment, orientation, professional learning, support of teachers and staff, induction processes, mentoring, Aboriginal teachers and providing supportive environments. In summary, this theme is about finding and keeping the right people to best suit the remote teaching context.

FIGURE 12: HOW SHOULD SYSTEMS RESPOND TO REMOTE EDUCATION?



Implications

The importance of ethical listening and actions

Currently, the institutions of government hold the most power for deciding what is to be taught, how it should be taught and what a remote education is for, but tend to hold others responsible for the perceived failure, or powerlessness of their own programs (see Abbott 2015, Forrest 2014b). Under this model of ethical listening and action, venues should be explored for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to speak on their own terms, that is, for power-sensitive dialogue (Haraway 2004), and then the institutions need to act by stepping back and supporting the aspirations of communities.

Implications for researchers

Researchers also have significant power in representing and validating what is believed to be true about Indigenous peoples, a point that has been made strongly and clearly the world over by Indigenous scholars such as Linda Smith (2012), Irabinna Rigney (1999), Russel Bishop (2011), Martin Nakata (2007), Veronica Arbon (2008a), Aileen Moreton-Robinson (1998) and Linda Ford (2010), just to name a small fraction of these voices. Indigenous scholarship needs to be central in informing research methodologies in remote education research, and the RES project has attempted to work from the arguments Indigenous scholars have made in relation to power and research-generated representations of Indigenous voices. Privileging Indigenous voices, epistemologies and scholarship in Indigenous research addresses, in some way, historical and continuing unequal power relationships in Indigenous research. In this regard, relationships are critical because without trusting and power-sensitive relationships, it is impossible to get at any truth in Indigenous research activities. For researchers, there are important questions to consider in the context of the Delpit model, questions like, 'What are the possibilities for remote communities to pursue their own questions of interest that are generated from within the community and strengthen local community aspirations?' (see Appadurai 2004, 2006).

Pre-service teacher preparation

Delpit also argues that teachers from these communities 'must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest' (Delpit 1993, p. 138). Historically dynamic remote Aboriginal teacher education programs such as Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory, Anangu Tertiary Education Program at UniSA, RATEP out of James Cook University in Queensland and Deakin's remote teacher training program based in Victoria are facing significant challenges in the current environment. Now, the tightened Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) teacher standards, the Australian Curriculum and a narrow remote education policy focus mean that it is very difficult for most remote educators to become qualified teachers and shape the nature of education in their local community. Universities need to think carefully about how they will plan to privilege local educators, voices, languages and epistemologies in this context, both within remote teacher preparation programs, but also in how local priorities are advocated for in the discourse as well as in the research agenda.

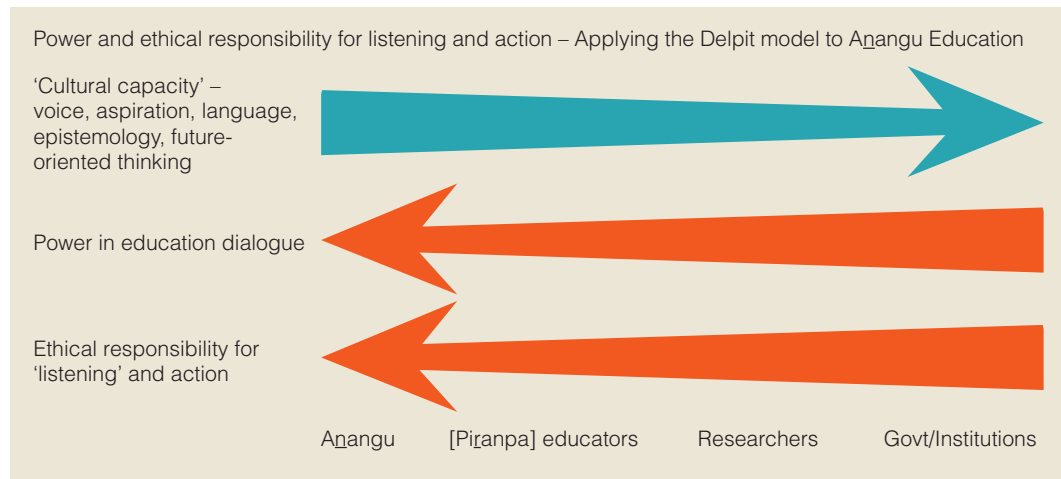
Remote educators

Remote educators are in a difficult position in that they are somewhat caught between the demands of the communities they are working and living in and the upward accountability environment (Rizvi & Lingard 2010) of the system they work within. Despite their feelings of limited influence, they still hold more power than remote Aboriginal community members in education dialogue. As Delpit describes, 'Issues of power are enacted in classrooms' and 'are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power'. Despite the fact that in remote communities,

nearly all of the students will speak local languages before English, teachers inevitably reproduce implicit social and academic codes, often as a cloudy mirror of the kind of school environment they grew up in. In this sense, remote classrooms can operate as an island of culture where teachers, rather than families and communities, determine what a remote education is for, and therefore what and how learning should occur.

In summary, Figure 13 shows how Delpit's model can be applied to Anangu education and probably more broadly to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

FIGURE 13: A MODEL FOR LISTENING AND ACTION APPLIED TO REMOTE EDUCATION



red dirt



Digging deeper

Burton, R., & Osborne, S. (2014). At the heart of learning (series paper 4 of 4): Kuranyu-kutu nyakula nyaan nyanganyi? Imagining the future. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 10(1), 33-44.

Minutjukur, M., & Osborne, S. (2014). At the heart of learning (series paper 2 of 4): Witulya mulapa nganana mantjintjaku: From cultural devastation to cultural reinvention. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 10(1), 15-22.

Osborne, S. (2014). Puṭuṇa kulini: The trouble with 'hearing'. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 10(1), 3-14.

Tjitayi, K., & Osborne, S. (2014). Kurunta kanyintja: Holding knowledge in our spirit. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 10(1), 23-32.

Osborne, S., & Guenther, J. (2013). Red Dirt Thinking on Power, Pedagogy and Paradigms: Reframing the Dialogue in Remote Education. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 111-122. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.19

Video links

Watch a short video that introduces the topic of power and pedagogy



Watch Lecture #11 on power and pedagogy in remote schools or read the accompanying paper



Watch Sam Osborne, Katrina Tjitayi and Makinti Minutjukur present on Anangu Maths



S3.

Hearing the voices of remote Aboriginal people

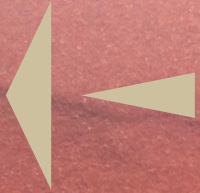
An important goal of the RES project was to ensure the voices of remote community members were heard. Part of this was about listening to local people in communities through our data-gathering processes, but it was also about giving voice to people through joint publications and presentations. This section includes four chapters on the following topics:

C6: What is education for in a remote community?

C7: What is educational success in remote communities?

C8: A Red Dirt Curriculum

C9: Teacher quality and qualities



C6: WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES?

Chapter overview

In Australia a 'good' education has some assumed meanings that are rarely unpacked. This chapter takes the 2008 Melbourne Declaration as a starting point for understanding how a good education is expressed in terms of policy, measurement and anticipated outcomes. While the Melbourne Declaration provides a useful basis for education policy, it treats Australia as a unified whole. The RES project wanted to determine whether what was assumed at a national level applies equally to remote communities. It asked locals living in very remote communities what they want from education. What do they say it should be for? Here, the foundations of Western education in Australia and its intersection (and disconnects) with schooling in remote communities are explored. The aim is to show that the reasons for the 'intractable' nature of the remote education problem have more to do with cultural distance than they do with remoteness.

Key messages

- From the perspective of those living in remote communities, education is not primarily about preparing young people for work; rather, it is to ensure that their language, culture and identity remain strong and that they maintain a connection to their land.
- While there is a strong focus on educational and employment outcomes from schooling, the 2008 Melbourne Declaration (on which much current policy is based) supports a broader array of purposes, which are not contrary to the aspirations of remote communities.
- Inspiration is possible, but non-local educators need to ensure that they don't simply transplant their own ideas into minds of people who don't know what they are talking about.

What does the literature say?

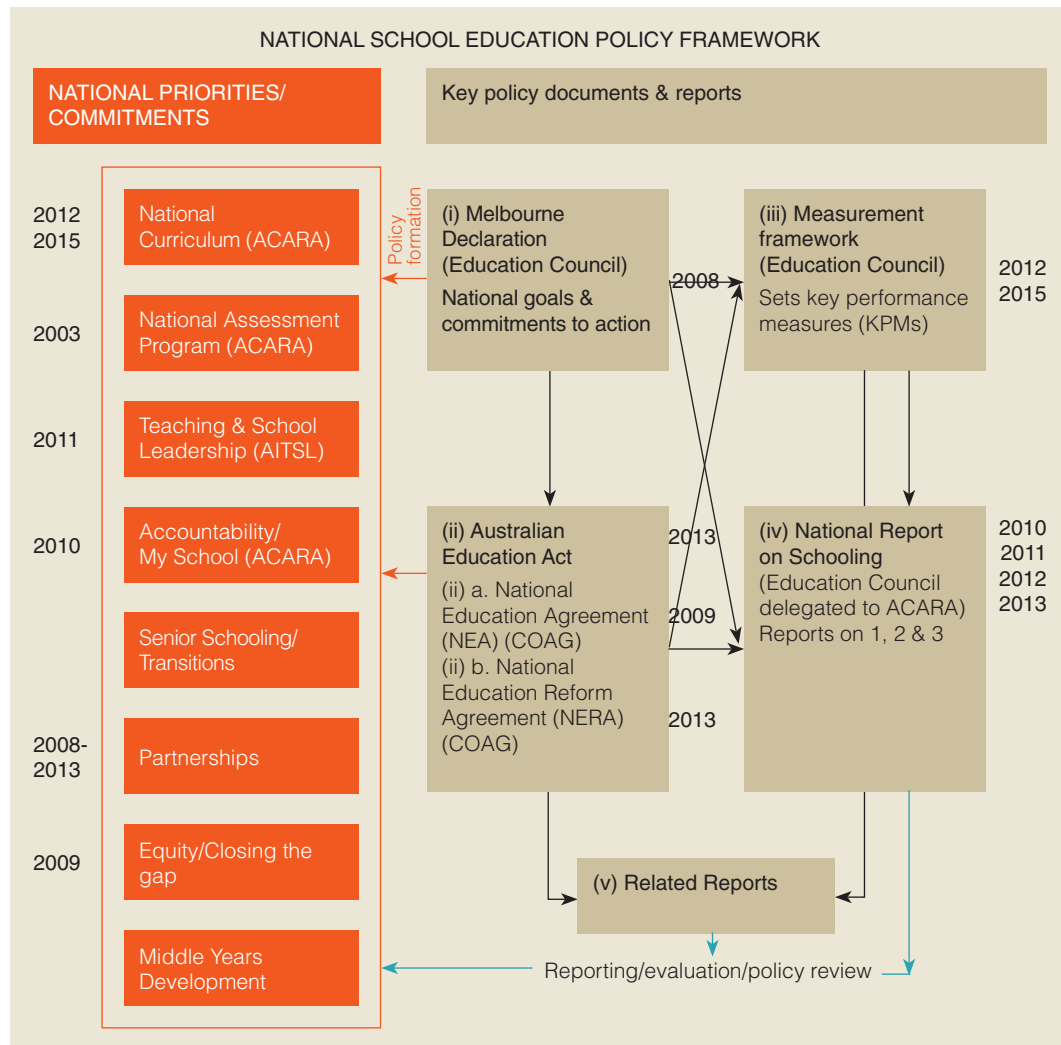
Those who have been through the compulsory education system in Australia and are now training to be teachers will know that the question of what 'education is for' is seldom asked or answered. A 'good' education, similarly, has some assumed meanings that are rarely unpacked. We agree with Biesta (2009, p. 36), who argues that: 'There is very little explicit discussion ... about what constitutes good education'. However, here we want to take the 2008 Melbourne Declaration as a starting point for understanding how a good education is expressed in terms of policy, measurement and anticipated outcomes. The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* articulates two main objectives:

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

Goal 2: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. (Ministerial Council on Education 2008, p. 7)

If we follow the trail from the Melbourne Declaration to where we are now (Figure 14), we see a codification of professional standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2012) and—notwithstanding the recent Review of the Australian Curriculum (Donnelly & Wiltshire 2014)—a national codification of curriculum (ACARA 2012b). While there is a good argument for this prescriptive approach in terms of quality assurance, equity and accountability, the system's measures of success have been delimited so that what is measured is tightly focused on a fairly narrow set of literacy and numeracy knowledges and capabilities, represented in the *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia 2015* (ACARA 2015).

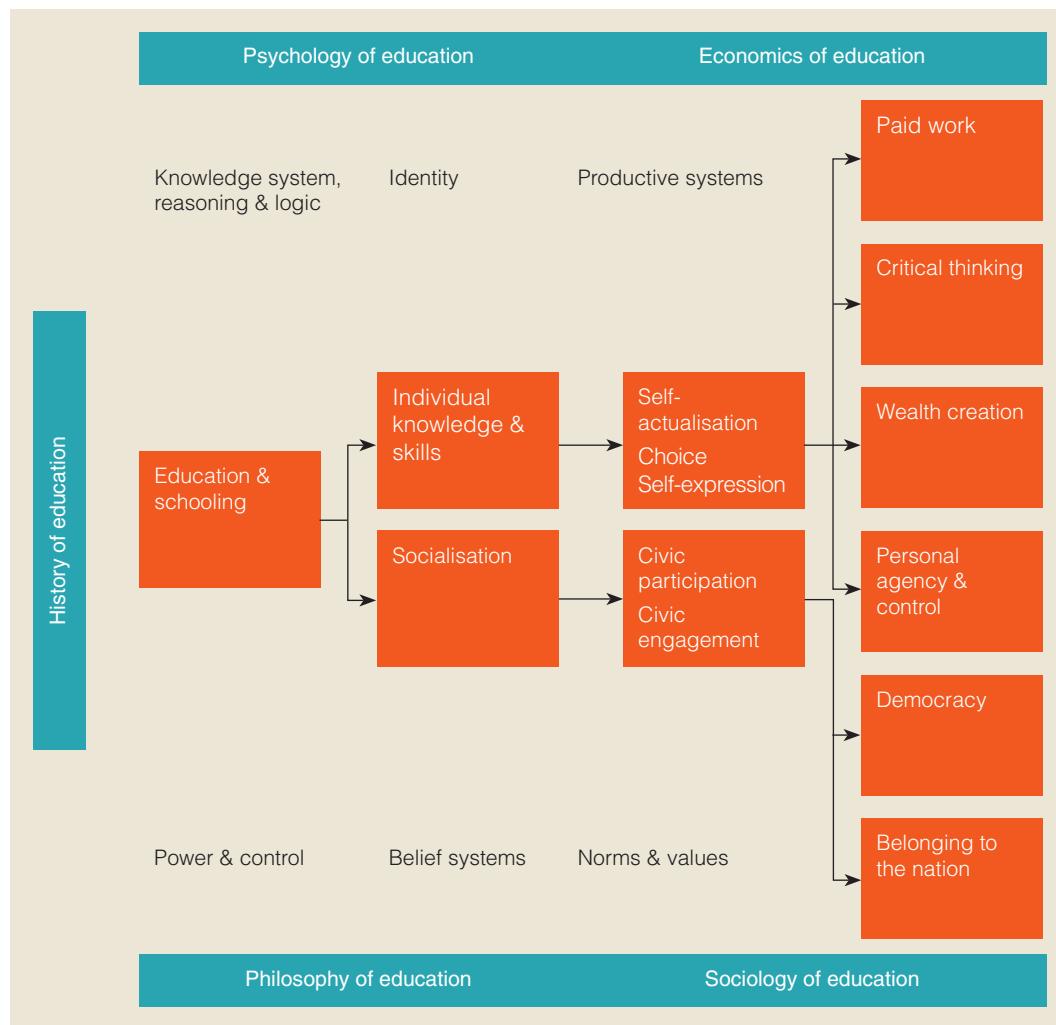
FIGURE 14: POLICY DRIVERS FOR AUSTRALIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEMS



ACARA. (2015). *Measurement Frameworks for Schooling in Australia 2015*. ACARA, Sydney. Retrieved February 2016 from http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Measurement_Framework_for_Schooling_in_Australia_2015.pdf

However, education is about more than literacy and numeracy. Philosophically, education has multiple aims and functions and has intrinsic value beyond reading and writing. It is about knowledge and skills, but it is also about values, about socialisation, about citizenship; it prepares young people for a future in work; it is about equity and rights, transformation; and it is also about childhood and adolescent development. More broadly, education establishes our place in an ever-shrinking world (for a brief introduction to philosophies of education see Bailey 2010). The purposes of education could be summarised perhaps imperfectly as follows in Figure 15. In broad terms, the drivers of education are framed by the historical, philosophical, sociological, economic and psychological positions or standpoints of the 'system'.

FIGURE 15: DEFINING THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION



Adapted from Guenther et al. (2013)

By 'system' we refer to the established structures that support the provision of education, whether they be through private or public means. These standpoints inform the structural and operational environments that govern how a good education produces desirable outcomes. These environments are reflected in the hegemonic structures that define whose knowledge and logic matters; where power and control reside; whose beliefs, norms and values are important; and where productivity lies.

However, the expectations of the system are focused on academic performance, preparation for further or higher education (retention to year 12), transition to employment or some form of economic engagement and, to some extent, civic participation. For most students, these assumptions about a good education work well. However, in very remote parts of Australia where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders live, there are repeated calls for improving outcomes (for example Forrest 2014a, Pearson et al. 2009). The blame for the apparent failure of remote education is sometimes placed on poor teaching, the quality of teachers, inadequate resourcing, problems with curriculum and, often, on problems with the communities. The problems are often described as 'intractable' (see for example O'Keefe et al. 2012, Wilson 2014).

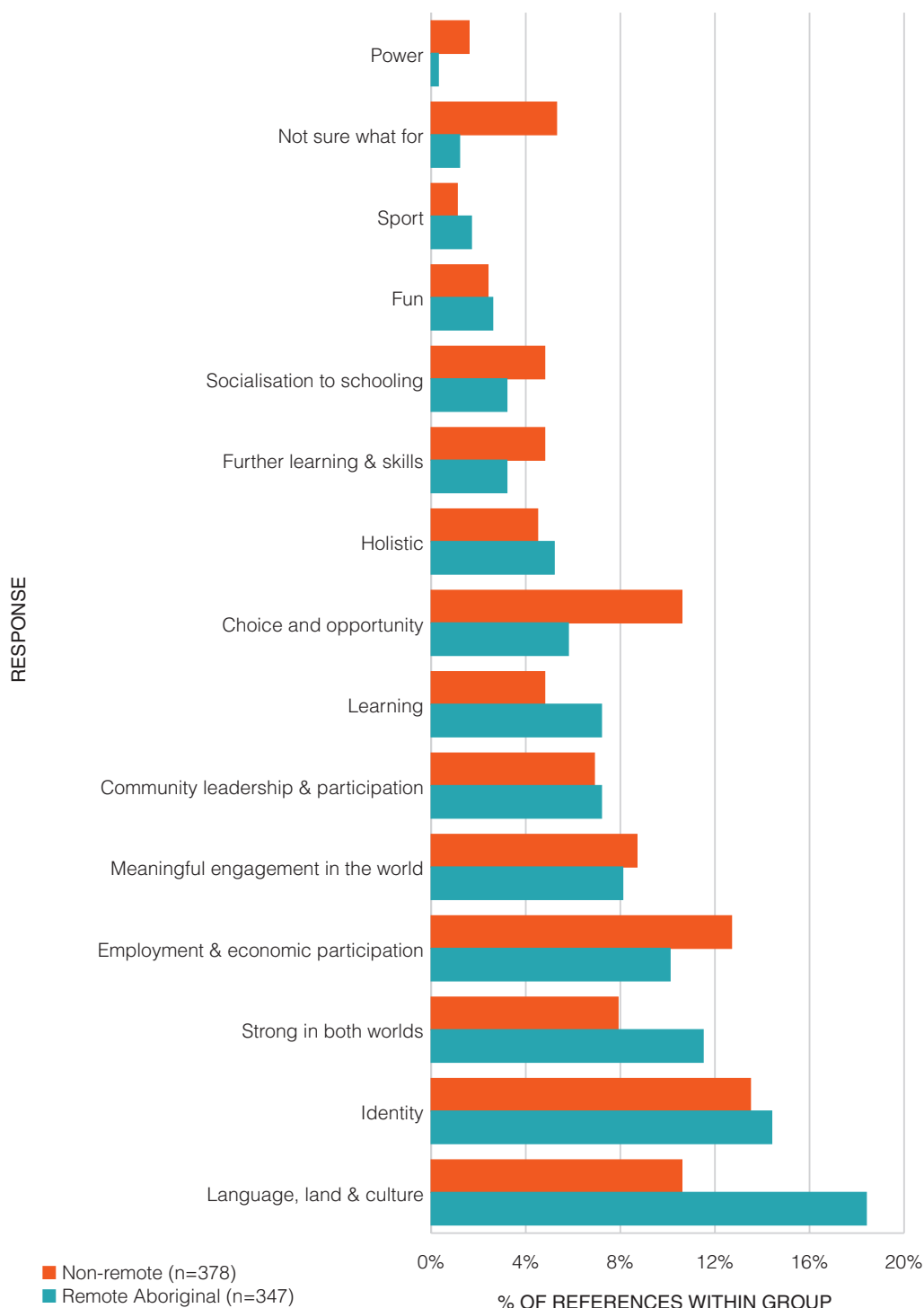
We could be led to believe that across Australia, the purposes of education are uniform and that people living in very remote communities share the same aspirations as everyone else and are therefore extremely frustrated at their apparent inability, or maybe incapability (Klein 2016), to achieve the dreams and goals of education as **we have portrayed them**. The problem with the above analysis is that it fails to take into account the unique context (**Chapter 1**) of remote Australia where the objects of metro-centric disadvantage live (**see Chapter 3**). Our task, then, was to interrogate the question of 'education: what for?' from the remote community perspective.

What does the RES evidence say?

Figure 16 shows what RES respondents think education is for, in summary form. The largest number of responses were categorised as 'language, land and culture'. In short, this is about maintaining strong links to local language, kinship and stories. This view of education was articulated more strongly by remote Aboriginal people than others. 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 were the importance of belonging, individuals knowing who they are, and being confident and strong in spirit. A third 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 in 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 fourth most common response from remote Aboriginal people to the question 'What is education for?' related to employment and economic participation: the importance of education leading to jobs.



FIGURE 16: WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR IN REMOTE AUSTRALIA?



Note: Click to see [descriptors of the categories on the chart](#)

What did remote Aboriginal respondents actually say?

Read a selection of comments from respondents related to [language, land and culture](#), [identity](#), being [strong in both worlds](#) and [employment and economic participation](#).

Implications

What might these remote views of 'what education is for' mean more practically? We looked at the data to see what else people said about success, teaching to success and an appropriate system response. For example, if education is for maintaining identity, what does success then look like and what does an appropriate system response look like? Figure 17 shows us visually what happens when you look through the lenses of the top five responses: employment and economic participation; identity; language, land and culture; strong in both worlds; and meaningful engagement in the world. Looking at the **employment** filter, we see parent involvement as the key indicator of success, and supporting inspiration and aspiration as the system response. Co-occurrences under successful teaching were quite limited, with just one co-occurrence related to contextually responsive teaching appearing in the model. This is important, because it suggests that schools are unsure of how they can assist in achieving this purpose.

When the **identity** filter is applied, we see success defined as community engagement, with a number of minor themes around this; a limited view of the system response built on partnerships and community power; and a cluster of teaching responses built around **contextually responsive approaches**.

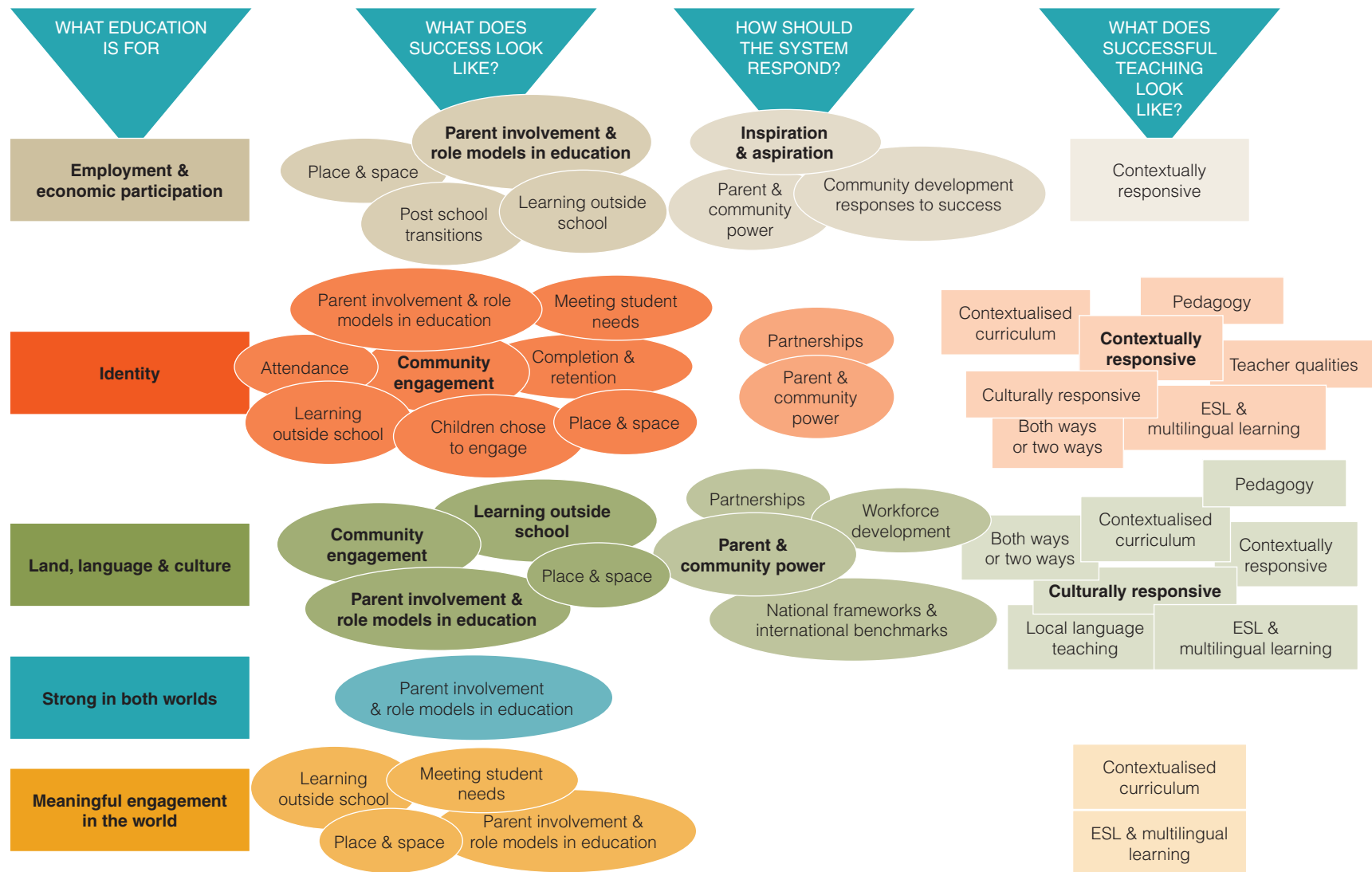
Applying the **land, language and culture** filter, we see success built around three key themes of community engagement, learning outside school and parental involvement. The system response is then seen with a key theme of **parent and community power**, supported by a cluster of teaching responses built around culturally responsive approaches.

The **strong in both worlds** filter yields no key system or teaching responses and only a minor indicator of success as parental involvement. The **meaningful engagement in the world** filter reveals a small cluster of success indicators with learning outside school as the most frequent, but no system response and two minor teaching responses related to contextualised curriculum and ESL/multilingual learning.

In summary, when respondents talk about the purpose of education being for language, land and culture or for maintaining identity, the function of school is quite clear. But when the conversation shifts towards employment or being strong in both worlds, the roles of school in achieving these aims are less than clear.



FIGURE 17: LOOKING AT THE QUESTION 'EDUCATION: WHAT IS IT FOR?'



Key resources for principals and school councils

Guenther, J. (2015). *Overview of Remote Education Systems qualitative results*. CRC-REP Working Paper. CW025, Ninti One Limited. Retrieved July 2015 from http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/CW025_RemoteEducationSystemsQualitativeResults.pdf

Guenther, J., & Bat, M. (2013). Towards a Good Education in Very Remote Australia: Is it Just a Case of Moving the Desks Around? *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 145-156. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.22

Guenther, J., Milgate, G., O'Beirne, P., & Osborne, S. (2014). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations and expectations of schooling in very remote Australian schools*. Paper presented at the AARE Conference Proceedings, Queensland University of Technology Kelvin Grove Campus, Brisbane. 1-4 December 2014. Retrieved from http://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2014//data/2014_Conference/Full_papers/GUENTHER_14.pdf

Osborne, S., & Guenther, J. (2013). Red Dirt Thinking on Aspiration and Success. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 88-99. doi:10.1017/jie.2013.17

Video links

View a short video that introduces the topic



View Lecture #1, What is education for in remote schools?, or read the accompanying paper



Watch the Red Dirt Curriculum lecture



John Guenther and Sam Osborne discuss what education is for in remote schools



C7: WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES?

Chapter overview

In the context of Australian schools, educational ‘success’ is a much sought-after prize. Successful schools and students are lauded for their achievements. Parents take great pride in seeing their children graduate from school and go on to bigger and better things. If educational success is a much sought-after prize in the mainstream of schooling, it is the holy grail of education for those students who come from remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In the dominant discourse, laments of failure in remote schools are explained away as a result of disadvantage, dysfunction, poverty and gaps that need closing. Magic bullets and quick fixes are often suggested as the solutions for an intractable problem. The fixes include sending kids to boarding schools, getting better quality teachers, improving attendance, and imposing sanctions for parents whose kids truant.

But let’s take a step back for a moment. Just what is success? And what does it look like in the minds of remote education stakeholders? This chapter responds to these basic questions in the light of findings from the CRC-REP Remote Education Systems (RES) project. It turns out that success is not what we might think it is. It isn’t about year 12 completion, quality teachers, going on to university, and it certainly isn’t about NAPLAN scores. Rather, success in the eyes of remote education stakeholders—and more particularly, remote Aboriginal community members—is about parent and community involvement in schools. It is about community engagement. And while academic outcomes are important for remote stakeholders, to a large extent this just means being able to read, write and count. These findings explain to some extent why the magic bullets and quick fixes have not worked. The chapter concludes with some suggestions, based on the research data, about how schools and systems can best respond to community perceptions of success.

Key messages

- From the perspectives of those living in remote communities, educational success in remote schools is not primarily about Year 12 completion, retention or NAPLAN scores; rather, it is primarily about parent and community involvement in education.
- An appropriate system response would be to give power to parents and communities, enabling them to be more involved in decisions that affect their schools.

What does the literature say?

Education for students in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is often described as problematic, intractable (Wilson 2014), difficult to manage and resource (Ladwig & Sarra 2009) and failing (Hughes & Hughes 2012b). Attempts to 'fix' the problem have often involved investing in programs and strategies with laudable goals and targets but which often fall well short of the anticipated outcomes (see for example ACER 2013, Atelier Learning Solutions 2012). The expected outcomes generally line up with other attempts to overcome disadvantage (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014), close gaps (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2013) and promote 'what works' (What Works: The Work Program 2012) as if there were some kind of magic formula that would remove the 'obstacles to success' (O'Keefe et al. 2012) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Seldom in the literature is 'success' defined or critically discussed. Success, we are told, is about better NAPLAN scores, improved retention rates, transition into further education, higher education and employment, or the 'no brainer' of just getting the kids to attend (Kerin 2014).

Success, of course, is not as simple as these solutions suggest, let alone in the cross-cultural contexts of communities in remote parts of Australia. In the discussion that follows I will focus on just three aspects of successful education: successful learning, successful teaching and successful systems. I will show how success is defined, how it is achieved and how it is measured from an Australian system-wide perspective. By 'system', I mean the supply side of education in its various forms, including departments of education, the non-government sectors and the various supporting instruments that govern the delivery of education in Australia (see discussion of this in Bat & Guenther 2013). These instruments include Acts, agreements, universities which train teachers, curricula, professional standards, funding arrangements, measurement frameworks and policymakers.

Successful learning

To a large extent 'success', as defined by education systems, depends on perceptions of what education is for (see [Chapter 6](#)). In 2013, we problematised this within the context of remote education in Australia (Guenther & Bat 2013). If, as we argued then (see also Guenther et al. 2013), a good education—in Australia at least—leads to economic participation and wealth, capacity to think, individual agency and control, democratic participation and a sense of belonging, then those are the things that we should count as success. The 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education 2008) concurs with these aims, suggesting that successful learners develop their capacity to learn, have essential skills in literacy and numeracy, are able to think deeply and logically, are creative and innovative, can make sense of the world and are on a pathway to 'continued success in further education, training or employment' (p. 8). The Melbourne Declaration has resulted in a series of actions that are designed to achieve those (among other) ends. One of the actions that followed was a *Measurement Framework* (ACARA 2012a), which attempts to set out how educational outcomes should be measured according to the *National Education Agreement* (Standing Council on Federal Financial Relations 2012). In the end, the Measurement Framework identified four indicator areas: participation, achievement in the National Assessment Program, attainment and equity. The array of indicators for these outcome areas is largely based on test scores, attendance rates and apparent retention rates, along with participation in training or employment. The framework does not measure equitable education; it measures equity groups, as a proxy.

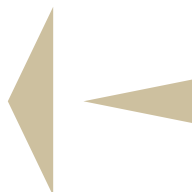
We question whether these indicators and frameworks effectively capture the value of education and whether the concepts of success and aspiration are valid constructs in a remote community context (Osborne & Guenther 2013).

Successful teaching

A successful education involves successful teaching as well as learning. In 2010, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was formed to promote teacher quality through initial teacher education, better school leadership and support for teachers to maximise their impact on student learning. The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2012) were subsequently developed. According to this framework, successful teachers are those who know their students; know the content and how to teach it; plan and implement effective teaching and learning; create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments; assess, provide feedback and report on student learning; engage in professional learning; and engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community. We discuss this issue further in [Chapter 9](#), but for now we simply highlight the significance in Australia of standards as the determining foundation of teacher/teaching quality and its assessment/measurement.

Successful systems

The intent of the current Australian reform agenda is clearly articulated by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG):



Raising productivity is a key focus of COAG's agenda, and education and training are critical to increasing the productivity of individual workers and the economy. (Council of Australian Governments 2012)



The Australian Government's education policy focus, Students First, largely affirms the 2012 COAG directions. It adds one additional element: Engaging parents in education. The rationale for this is given as follows:

Effective parent and family engagement in education is more than just participation in school meetings and helping with fundraising, it is actively engaging with your child's learning, both at home and at school. (Department of Education and Training 2015)

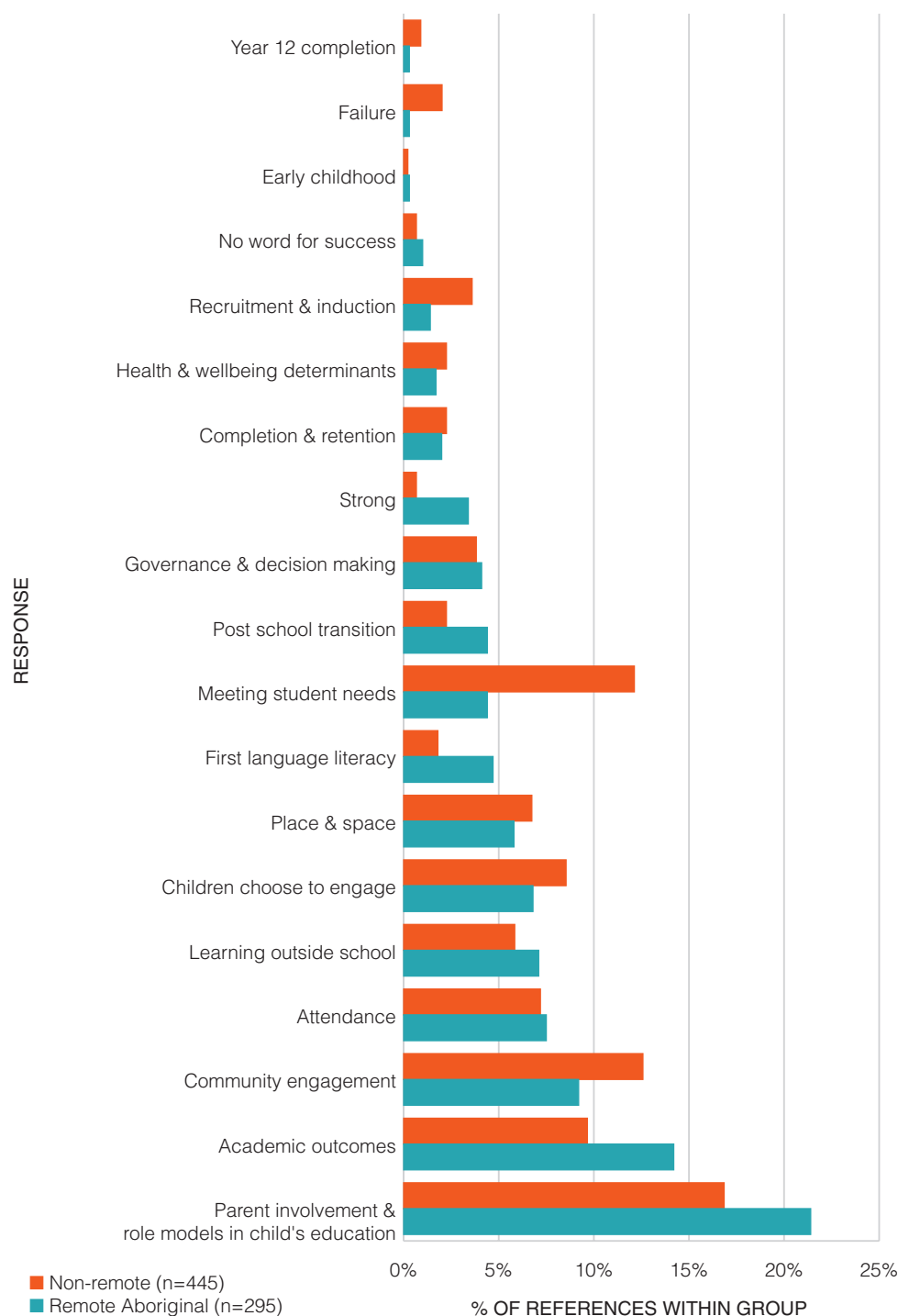
The OECD's recent Policy Outlook (OECD 2015) suggests a number of policy areas that contribute to an effective education system. They firstly include policies that improve equity and quality and which prepare young people for the future. Secondly, they include policies for school improvement, evaluation and assessment. And finally they promote system governance and funding for efficiency and effectiveness. In Australia, much attention has been given to what we can learn from, and how we compare with, other high performing school systems, particularly in Singapore, Korea, the administrative region Hong Kong and the city of Shanghai (Jensen 2012) and notably also in Finland (ABC 2012, COAG Reform Council 2013). Many of the policy reforms and levers I have noted here are informed by those learnings.

However, while we recognise the significance of those learnings at a national and international level, how these policy initiatives work at the remote community level is something we question (Bat 2013). Therefore, if a more nuanced system response is to be successful for remote Australia, it would be helpful to understand what stakeholders see as an appropriate system response to the challenges of remote education.

What does the RES evidence say?

Figure 18 summarises our analysis of responses we received. The largest number of responses were categorised as **parent involvement and role models in child's education**. Respondents talked about parents encouraging their children, acting as role models, building aspiration for their children, being involved at school and supporting their children at a number of levels. In some cases, the role models described were extended family members or significant others in the community, who led the way for students.

FIGURE 18: WHAT DEFINES 'SUCCESSFUL' EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FROM THE REMOTE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STANDPOINT?



A few key points stand out from remote Aboriginal respondents. First, they point to the need for parents to support and encourage their children in school, being active and visible role models for their children. Second, they see family involvement in school as integral to successful outcomes for children. Third, they look to family and community members as key to educational leadership (and in many cases, our respondents were key educational leaders).

The second large group of responses, reported more frequently by remote Aboriginal respondents than non-remote respondents, was about **academic outcomes**. A majority of references here were about basic literacy and numeracy—the importance of being able to read and write English and count, as well as having basic comprehension and competence in speaking English. The references coded in this way did not mention NAPLAN scores, although some references were about progress in reading, numeracy or achievement in a general sense.

The third indicator of success was described in terms of **community engagement**. Respondents articulated this as consultation, community involvement, school–community partnerships, good communication between schools and communities, and bringing expertise from the community into the school. In brief, remote Aboriginal respondents saw community engagement as a two-way process: school working with and supporting the community, and community working with and supporting the school.

Non-remote and remote Aboriginal respondents counted **attendance** as a definition of success equally. While it was noted under ‘what defines success’, many respondents talked about it as a poor indicator or one which was dependent on other factors. Some respondents employed at schools talked about the need for improved attendance; others talked with some pride about having achieved improved attendance.

Of note too are those themes that did not rate as important for remote Aboriginal respondents: recruitment and induction, Year 12 completion, and engagement in early childhood, all of which scored fewer than five responses. However, the latter two themes were mentioned in very few responses overall as indicators of success in education. While nine non-remote references to ‘failure’ were recorded (as opposed to success), only one remote Aboriginal reference was coded this way.

What did remote Aboriginal respondents actually say?

Read a selection of comments from respondents related to **parent and community involvement**, **academic achievement**, **community engagement**, **attendance** and **learning outside of school**.



Implications

What might this all mean then if we were to offer an alternative metric for the measurement of success in remote schools? The data presented here points to indicators of success that go well beyond those described in the literature I discussed earlier. There is little congruence between the measures of success prescribed by the various policy documents that have shaped education strategies over recent years in Australia and those articulated by our remote Aboriginal respondents. While the focus at the policy level since 2008 has been on academic performance (or test scores) and participation (or attendance), those measures of success are not as strongly supported in our data. **Attendance and academic outcomes are identified by remote respondents, but there is little connection between these measures and system responses or teaching responses.** This does not suggest that attendance and academic performance are not important for remote Aboriginal stakeholders—they clearly are—but the question of how to achieve these aims, either through a systemic response or a teaching response, is not clearly answered.

The other two indicators of success, as articulated by our respondents, deserve consideration. **Parent involvement and role models in education** as an indicator of success in remote education is supported to some extent by the Australian Government's *Students First* policy initiative, as noted in the literature. This **could be seen as a measure of success in its own right** or as a precursor to other measures of success. However, in the minds of our respondents, this is what success looks like in remote schools: parents and family members taking an active role, encouraging, leading and supporting their children to do well at school.

There are ample references in the broader literature about the role of communities in schooling. The now superseded Parent and Community Engagement program is premised on the assumption that community engagement is important for educational outcomes. Our analysis of data from the Australian Census and publicly available school data from the My School website (ACARA 2016) suggests that community factors contribute to school (academic) outcomes as much as or more than school-based factors (Guenther et al. 2014b). Our qualitative research focusing on the role of schools and families in schools supports this assertion (Guenther 2014).



How could parent and community involvement be measured?

Some might suggest that parental involvement and community engagement are largely qualitative aspects of a community or school's activities. How then could schools measure parental involvement and community engagement? We would like to suggest a number of quantitative indicators that point to success in this way:

- Is there a school council with community representation? How many are involved?
- Does the school have parent-teacher days/events? How many attend?
- Is there a school policy that actively pursues employment of local educators? How many have been employed as a result?
- Do parents meet with teachers? What proportion of parents have contact?
- Are community members involved in extra-curricular activities? How often does this occur?
- Are community members employed at the school? What is the ratio of non-teaching staff to teaching staff?
- What practices are in place in the school to build relationships between local and non-local staff? How often do dedicated activities take place, such as learning together sessions, team planning?
- Do parents or community members help with reading to children? How many do this?
- Is there local adaptation of curriculum? How many local people are involved in the development and delivery of contextually relevant units and associated activities?
- Are community members involved in recruitment of new staff? How many are involved in this process?
- Are teachers competent with local languages? How many are learning a local language?
- Do teachers and non-local staff engage with organisations outside of school? How many are involved in a local church, sporting team or community group?

This, of course, is not an exhaustive list of indicators. Rather, it simply highlights how aspects of parent and community involvement could be measured and reported as elements of remote school success. The point of measuring these elements of success is not to see them as leading to success, but rather to see them as success in their own right. It could be that they do lead to other elements of successful schooling (such as attendance and academic outcomes).

How does this view of success associate with other aspects of remote schooling?

Figure 19 allows us to see visually how a view of success relates to what education is for, how teaching should change to achieve success and what an appropriate system response might be. Where the **parent involvement and role models in education** filter is applied, the purposes of education are clustered around two key themes of employment and economic participation; and language, land and culture. Multiple system responses are clustered around a key theme of parent and community power. An array of teaching responses is clustered around a key theme of contextually responsive teaching.

In contrast, when success is viewed as community engagement, the purpose of remote education is more narrowly defined around language, land and culture. The system response, as above, is focused on parent and community power. The teaching response, though, is clustered around relationships.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

WHAT EDUCATION IS FOR

Parent involvement & role models in education

Academic outcomes

Community engagement

Attendance

Learning outside school

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Identity

Language, land & culture

Employment & economic participation

Strong in both worlds

Meaningful engagement in the world

Partnerships

Workforce development

Inspiration & aspiration

Resourcing

Parent & community power

HOW SHOULD THE SYSTEM RESPOND?

Measurable outcomes & NAPLAN

WHAT DOES SUCCESSFUL TEACHING LOOK LIKE?

Both ways or two ways

Pedagogy

Classroom management

Health & wellbeing at school

Local Aboriginal educators

Contextually responsive

Teacher qualities

ESL & multilingual learning

Culturally responsive

Relationships

School leadership

Classroom management

Two ways or both ways

Local Aboriginal educators

Relationships

Contextualised curriculum

Contextually responsive

Pedagogy

Contextually responsive

Contextually responsive

When success is viewed as learning outside school, it aligns with a cluster of educational purposes centred on language, land and culture. The other filters (attendance and academic outcomes) represented in the model yield far less in terms of purpose, response and teaching approaches.

In summary, when success is viewed as either community engagement or parent and community involvement in schools, RES respondents give some fairly clear guidance about what they think education is for and how success can be achieved both in terms of teaching and in terms of system response. However, if we apply any of the other filters (such as attendance or academic performance), the purpose of education is largely lost, and appropriate strategies for teaching and system responses are lacking as well.

Digging deeper

Guenther, J. (2015). *Overview of Remote Education Systems qualitative results*. CRC-REP Working Paper. CW025, Ninti One Limited. Retrieved July 2015 from http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/CW025_RemoteEducationSystemsQualitativeResults.pdf

Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2015). Building on 'Red Dirt' Perspectives: What Counts as Important for Remote Education? *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 44(2), 194-206. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jie.2015.20>

Osborne, S. (2013). Learning Versus Education: Rethinking Learning in Anangu Schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 171-181. doi: doi:10.1017/jie.2013.24

Osborne, S. (2014). *Between the bookends: what else matters other than attendance and economic development in remote education?* Paper presented at the Australian Education Union Federal Conference, Melbourne. 21 February 2014. Retrieved from http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/OsborneS_AEUPresentationFeb2014.pdf

Osborne, S. (2015). Families as foundation: Anangu perspectives on what else matters in remote education. *UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts*, 4(2), 1-23.

Osborne, S. (2015). Learning from Anangu Histories: Population Centralisation and Decentralisation Influences and the Provision of Schooling in Tristate Remote Communities. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 44(2), 127-138.

Video links

Watch a short introduction to this topic



Garma Festival 2014. Dorothea Randall – Focus on Development and Initiative



In Lecture #5, Sam Osborne talks about what success in remote schools is



John Guenther talks about the importance of attendance as an indicator of success in remote schools



C8: A RED DIRT CURRICULUM

Chapter overview

The CRC-REP Remote Education Systems (RES) project has gathered and analysed data from remote education stakeholders across Australia with a view to identifying ways that outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools can be improved. Of the many findings that have emerged, the need for contextually responsive approaches to teaching stands out as one vehicle for improving the relevance and results for remote students.

But in an era of increasingly codified and standardised approaches to education (e.g. with Professional Standards, NAPLAN standardised testing, and an Australian Curriculum), what scope is there for remote teachers (or indeed systems) to contextualise curriculum to meet the needs of remote learners? We have used the term 'red dirt curriculum' to encapsulate the ideas and practical responses that remote education stakeholders perceive as important for learning. Our respondents have suggested a number of practical ways that curriculum can be made more contextually responsive. The question, though, is whether a contextualised curriculum stands opposed to the Australian Curriculum. Does the Australian Curriculum constrain teachers? Do the prescribed content areas limit how flexibly teachers can respond to communities' wishes for a meaningful education in remote parts of Australia? And given that remote students tend to be 'behind' those from urban areas, how should we meaningfully assess remote students using the national curriculum?

This chapter firstly examines the context of a standardisation and codification of education in recent years—and the implications of this for remote schooling. It then presents findings from the RES project about what remote education stakeholders want from education and, in particular, what a contextualised or red dirt curriculum would look like. Finally, it considers how teachers' use of a national curriculum for teaching and then for assessment could be contextualised to better meet the learning needs of remote students.

Key messages

- A red dirt curriculum is a way of describing teaching and learning content that is fit for the context of a school in a remote community.
- Red dirt curriculum speaks to the aspirations of remote community educators.
- Red dirt curriculum does not preclude application of the Australian Curriculum.



What does the literature say?

Before we explore what a red dirt curriculum is and what it might mean for remote Aboriginal education stakeholders, it will be useful to place this in a context of historical development within Australian national education policies and strategies. As we track this development forward from 2008, the reader may find it helpful to refer to Figure 20, which illustrates its multiple strands and paths.

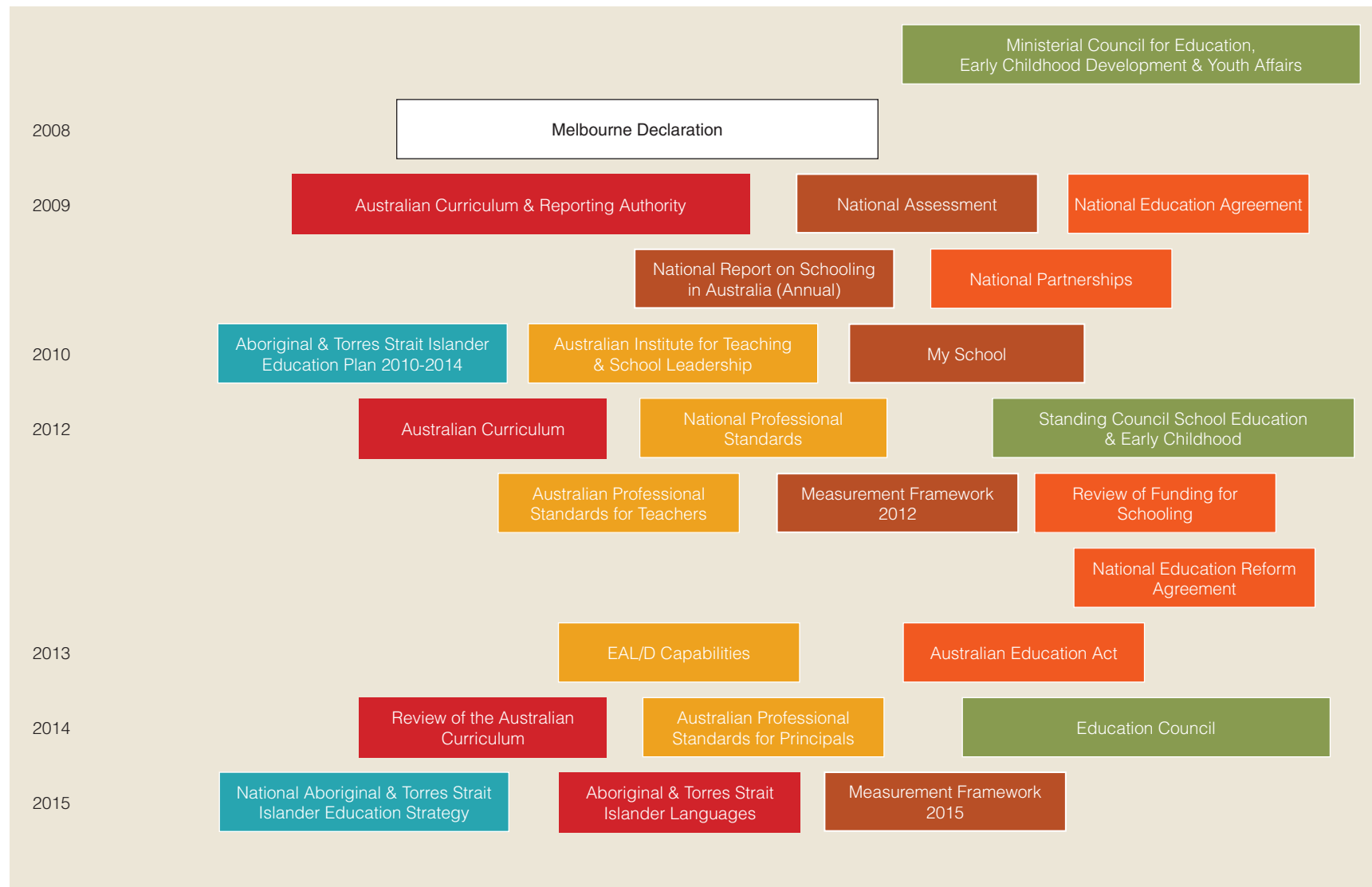
In **Chapter 7** we discussed how success is conceived in Australian education systems. We noted that there are several elements to success: successful learning, successful teaching and successful systems. In **Chapter 9** we discuss in some detail what it means to be a successful teacher. In this chapter our focus is on curriculum, which, as Figure 20 demonstrates, is an integral part of a successful system. The Melbourne Declaration resulted in a series of actions that were designed to achieve improvements in the system as a whole. The development of an **Australian Curriculum** was one of the actions. According to ACARA: 'The rationale for introducing an Australian Curriculum centres on improving the quality, equity and transparency of Australia's education system' (ACARA 2012c, p. 5). Quality here refers to a 'world class education', 'skills needed for life and work in the 21st Century' and 'high standards of achievement' (p. 5). Considerable work has been done over recent years to develop content for a range of **areas**: English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, The arts, Technologies, Health and Physical Education, and Languages. Further, the resources that are available for teachers in these content areas are considerable (see **Scoutle**). While there was some argument about what the curriculum should include, the Australian Government's **Review of the Australian Curriculum** (Donnelly & Wiltshire 2014) and the Government's initial response (Australian Government 2014) added little more than philosophical tinkering around the edges, with changes recommended due to be fully enacted by the end of 2015.

How does this all affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly those living and going to school in remote communities? Some might suggest that age/year-based standardised curriculum content is inappropriate for remote students given their relatively low achievement in English literacy and numeracy (Reynolds 2012), their different learning context and the potential for curriculum to reproduce race-based inequalities (Larkin 2015). To counter that argument, the Australian Curriculum offers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures as a cross-curriculum priority. ACARA argues that through the 'Australian Curriculum, students will understand that contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are strong, resilient, rich and diverse' (ACARA 2014a). Further, ACARA has recently released a *Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages* (ACACA 2016), which recognises the significance of learning an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language.

Supporting these initiatives, the *Capability Framework – Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D learners* has been developed by education departments from New South Wales, Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia. This document sets out the professional learning needs of teachers, particularly where Aboriginal English, creoles and traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are spoken as the first language (Department of Education Training and Employment 2014). This could be coupled with ACARA's EAL/D resources (ACARA 2014b), which give further advice to teachers about the particular needs of EAL/D learners.

red dirt

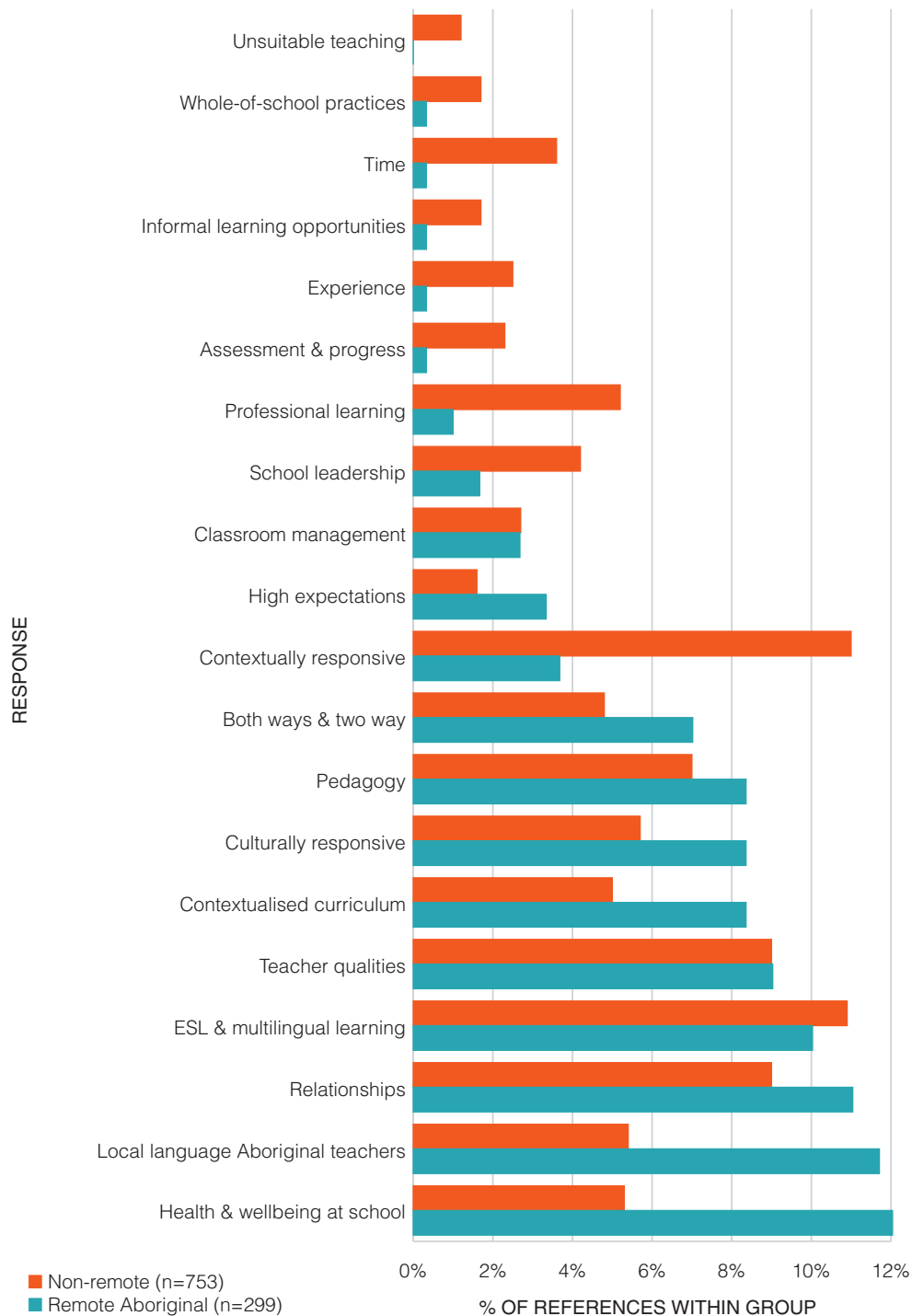
FIGURE 20: AUSTRALIAN EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN CONTEXT



What does the RES evidence say?

The foregoing discussion of curriculum and its context within Australian education policies sets the scene for an examination of what matters to people living in remote communities. In Chapter 7 we considered what educational success looked like. A key element of this is parent and community involvement. Following from this we see that successful teaching (Figure 21) requires the involvement of local teachers, culturally and contextually responsive teaching and both-ways approaches. Coupled with this is the need for a contextualised curriculum, which some of our respondents described as a 'red dirt curriculum'.

FIGURE 21: TEACHING TO SUCCESS



We'll hark back for a moment to the 2013 Red Dirt Curriculum Sydney Myer Rural Lecture (Lester et al. 2013), which provided a way of describing what we, and the Anangu ladies who talked about it, mean when we use that phrase. In that lecture Sam Osborne introduced it like this:

The focus of tonight's lecture is to re-imagine a curriculum that holds 'blue sky' thinking in one hand but firmly grasps a sense of the pragmatic in the other, and importantly, proposes what the core elements of a 'Red Dirt' or locally imagined and relevant curriculum might offer. Red dirt can be found across a range of landscapes and languages; from salt water country to the deserts and all points in between. (p. 4)

Katrina Tjitayi went on to say:

We've already got a Red Dirt curriculum and it's always been there. The strength and foundation of our language and culture is still there and we need to build our curriculum from that foundation. (p. 13)

Karina Lester then goes on to ask:

Are the children on the APY Lands learning about what is relevant and important to them in a school context?

Such as:

Identity and belonging

Which family they belong to and how to relate to walytja piti and extended family

The Land Rights movement, which is so critical to understanding how they got to be living in the 'Red Dirt'

Ennabella Mission and the role it played in the '30s, '40s and '50s.

Surrounding communities such as Mimili and its history

Tjukurpa / Wapar

This grounding in the Red Dirt grounds children in their knowledge of language, law and culture. Having this knowledge, children know where they belong and how they relate to their communities whether it be in their remote community or the wider Western Desert community and beyond. (p. 15)

According to Katrina and Karina, red dirt curriculum isn't new. It's really just a way of describing what's always been there for them. But, importantly, it is built on a foundational purpose of education which is about reinforcing language, law and culture and ensuring learners know who they are and where they belong.

Bearing in mind that curriculum is largely about content rather than pedagogy, it is important to recognise that in the context of delivery it is at times difficult to divorce content from process or context. Hence, Table 5 shows elements of content as well as pedagogy, assessment and context.

The responses listed under 'contextualised curriculum' in the table are inextricably linked to other aspects of education, in particular to the purpose of education (Chapter 6). In other words, it's very hard to have a contextualised or red dirt curriculum that isn't connected to the primary purpose of education, which for our respondents is about 'language, land and culture' (see Figure 16). Similarly, the descriptors demonstrate that it is hard to divorce curriculum from pedagogy.

If language is important, then teachers' use of first language and their ability to teach EAL/D students, or even to teach ESL, is largely impossible. Content that is engaging for students and integrated with materials from the local context is difficult to deliver without sound pedagogy. We noted earlier the other important issue of teaching to success, which shows the significance of teachers and teaching practice—in particular, the importance of ESL and multilingual learning. These issues will be covered in some detail in Chapters 9, 10 and 11.

TABLE 5: ELEMENTS OF A CONTEXTUALISED OR 'RED DIRT' CURRICULUM (N=89)

THEMES	INCLUDES	REMOTE ABORIGINAL	NON-REMOTE	TOTAL
Engaging, integrated content	Integrated, contextualised, locally relevant	12	5	17
Language and culture	Local histories, bilingual, Aboriginal perspectives, learning on country, acceptance of Aboriginal English, stories	11	7	18
Local content	Adaptive to the local context, local culture, locally directed and supported	5	4	9
Meeting community expectations	Curriculum from the ground up, input and control from communities	3	10	13
Blending Western knowledge with traditional knowledge ...	... as opposed to imposing Western epistemologies	2	4	6
Meeting student needs	How to manage and respond to student needs, relate to others	2	10	12
Multiple sites for learning	Using art and technology, on country	2	2	4
Supporting identities	Not white ways of being, building resilience, belonging in the place	1	2	3
Appropriate assessment ...	... beyond a simple focus on literacy and numeracy	0	4	4
Don't try to cover too much	Avoiding unnecessary jargon	0	3	3
Total		38	51	89

Note: n represents the total number of references categorised under this heading; the numbers in the table refer to the number of times these themes were found in the data.

How could we build a red dirt curriculum?

We have tried to represent a model for the development of a 'Red Dirt Curriculum' (Figure 22), which we will now explain. It is important to recognise that local models of red dirt curriculum are already available in some places, particularly where there has been a history of bilingual or both-ways education.

At the core of a red dirt curriculum is local content. But a red dirt curriculum does not seek to divorce itself from external curriculum priorities. The two can go hand in hand because philosophically, local people want their children to be 'strong in both worlds' (see Figure 16). In order for **teaching to be culturally and contextually responsive** (a prerequisite of successful teaching in remote schools), a red dirt curriculum demands local input from local knowledge experts.

Underpinning a red dirt curriculum is a solid base of local culture and local philosophy. In our research, this is expressed in terms of the purpose of education being to ensure maintenance and strengthening of local culture and language and maintaining strong connections to land. But again, a red dirt curriculum is not divorced from Western philosophies. The imperative of two-ways or both-ways learning reinforces the need for an understanding of and, where appropriate, a utilisation of Western philosophies. And in practice, consistent with Nakata (Nakata et al. 2012) and Christie (Christie 2013, Verran & Christie 2007), these philosophies might not be either/or, but rather both/and.

The delivery of a red dirt curriculum requires a specific set of **teacher qualities** and teaching practices. In order for teachers to teach to the **local views of success**, RES respondents told us that local language teachers are required. But again, consistent with the idea of being 'strong in both worlds', this requires **English language teachers with ESL or EAL/D capabilities**. Team teaching is one way of bringing these two knowledges together.

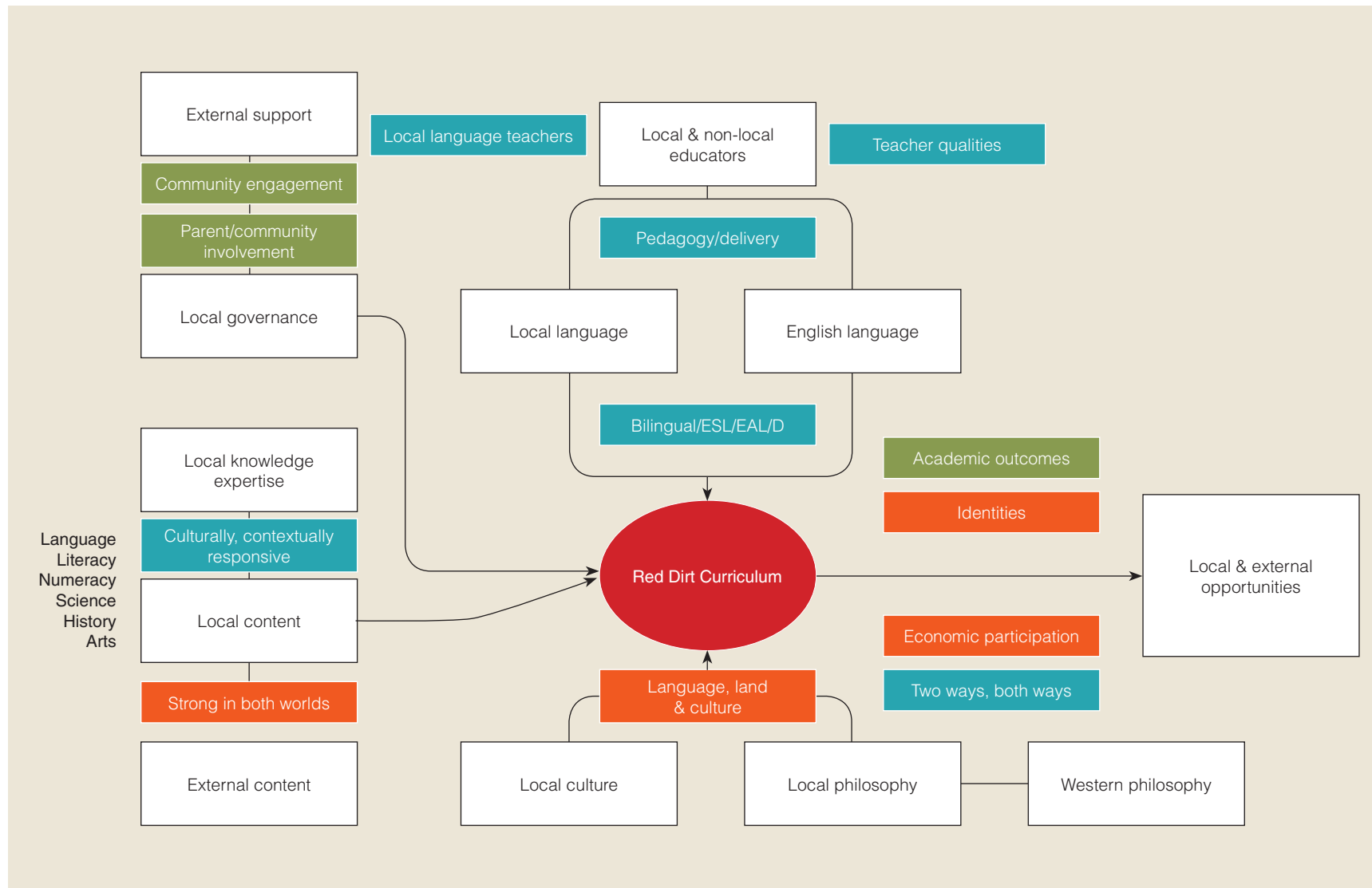
One of the foundational indicators of success for remote schools is about parent and community involvement in the school. This is reflected at least in part by local governance structures. The flip side of this is external support generated through effective community engagement.

Perhaps most importantly, a red dirt curriculum will produce outcomes for students. It will generate opportunities for a combination of locally and externally imagined futures. It will have a focus on academic outcomes; it will also seek to bridge learners into economic participation; and importantly, at least as far as our respondents were concerned, it will feed into the creation of healthy learner identities.

This model isn't ideal. There is an assumption that the systems and structures that surround a red dirt curriculum will be supportive. This is of course difficult to predict. But assuming all things being equal, it shouldn't be impossible, even with the volatility that exists within education policy.



FIGURE 22: HOW TO BUILD A RED DIRT CURRICULUM



Digging deeper

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Video links

Watch a short video clip that introduces the topic



Watch the 3rd Sydney Myer Lecture on Red Dirt Curriculum



Watch Sam Osborne talk about national curriculum and standards



Watch a trailer by honours student Susannah Emery showing how gaming could be used in a red dirt curriculum context



C9: TEACHER QUALITY AND QUALITIES

Chapter overview

Much of the blame for the apparent failure of remote education is attributed to poor teachers and teaching. Teachers are said to be young and inexperienced, they only come to remote places because they can't get a job elsewhere, and they leave after only a short time (the oft-quoted time is seven months). But research conducted by the CRC-REP's Remote Education Systems (RES) project tells a different story. The findings suggest that what matters in remote schools is not as much about the qualifications or experience of the teacher, as it is about the qualities the teacher brings to the context. That is, the data suggests that a non-local teacher's ability to form strong relationships with local educators, other staff, parents and students is critical to their success. Their capacity for creativity, innovation, learning, adaptation and commitment; their dedication and their care for the students they teach; and their willingness to learn a local language all matter to their professional practice, and a lot to local people. While some of these qualities line up with the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, there is a lot more to a successful remote school teacher than their qualification level and their years of experience.

If this is so, the issues this chapter ultimately addresses, are 1) how universities can best prepare pre-service teachers for remote schools, and 2) how systems can better recruit and retain the kind of quality teachers that are required for the remote context.

Key messages

- Teacher quality and quality teaching in remote schools are determined more by a set of qualities than by a set of qualifications.
- Qualities important for teachers include the ability to build constructive relationships with assistants, students and parents.
- Successful teachers will bring traits such as passion, care, commitment, patience and respect and the ability to listen.

What does the literature say?

Rationale: Better teachers/teaching equals better outcomes

Over the four years of this project, we have seen dozens of simple solutions to complex problems. For example, some see the solution to the perceived problem as a matter of getting quality teachers (whatever they are) who can teach well (whatever that means). These statements come from a variety of sources:

The problem is the quality of the schools, particularly the curriculum and the teaching methods. (Anderson 2012, p. 4)

There needs to be focused additional concrete efforts to make sure that kids attend school – and there the parents and communities do have a responsibility. (Garrett 2012)

*This is the formula upon which our reform in Cape York is premised:
Committed Teacher + Effective Instruction = Quality Teaching.*
(Pearson 2011, p. 53)

Put simply, quality teachers create quality outcomes. (Sarra 2011, p. 161)

"All of the good jobs with lots of money go to people who have gone to school," Mr Abbott said, instructing the children to attend school every day. (Elks 2011)

Curtisha has completed preschool – she knows how to hold a pencil, listen to the teacher, and adapt to the formal routines of the day. She's ready for school. Ready for the future. The mistakes made in one generation are being repaired in the next. The gap is being closed. (Gillard 2013)

School failure is the problem. (Hughes & Hughes 2012b, p. 1)

Hughes and Hughes go on and on about failure, blaming 'quality of instruction' (p. 15) as one of two principal causes. Not far behind in the list of causes though is welfare dependence. Apparently, 'students [failing students in remote schools] attend failing Indigenous schools and live in communities where 100% of the population is welfare-dependent' (p. 17).

What defines teacher quality and quality teaching?

We start with a policy perspective before considering the issue of teacher quality and quality teaching from perhaps an academic perspective. Then we look at some considerations for remote teachers.

In 2008, COAG committed \$444 million to improving teacher quality (Council of Australian Governments 2008a). The rationales for this National Partnership Agreement were many and varied:

The Parties are committed to addressing the issue of social inclusion, including responding to Indigenous disadvantage. (p. 3)

This Agreement supports ambitious, nationally-significant reforms ... provide the platform for raising student performance and build the foundation necessary to underpin other school reforms endorsed by COAG. (p. 6)

The outcomes it sought to achieve were many and varied too (p. 7):

- (a) attracting the best entrants to teaching, including mid-career entrants*
- (b) more effectively training principals, teachers and school leaders for their roles and the school environment*
- (c) placing teachers and principals to minimise skill shortages and enhance retention*
- (d) developing teachers and school leaders to enhance their skills and knowledge throughout their careers*
- (e) retaining and rewarding quality principals, teachers and school leaders*
- (f) improving the quality and availability of teacher workforce data.*

All this sounds laudable. But nowhere in the document is 'quality teaching' or a 'quality teacher' defined. We are left to deduce the meaning from the outputs prescribed by the Agreement. These outputs, which presumably lead to quality teachers, include:

The Agreement will contribute to the following outputs:

- (a) New professional standards to underpin national reforms*
- (b) Recognition and reward for quality teaching*
- (c) A framework to guide professional learning for principals, teachers and school leaders*
- (d) National accreditation of pre-service teacher education courses*
- (e) National consistency in teacher registration*
- (f) National consistency in accreditation/certification of Accomplished and Leading Teachers*
- (g) Improved mobility of the Australian teaching workforce*
- (h) Joint engagement with higher education to provide improved pre-service teacher education; new pathways into teaching; and data collection to inform continuing reform action and workforce planning*
- (i) Improved performance management in schools for teachers and school leaders*
- (j) Enhanced school-based teacher quality reforms.*

In short, a quality teacher conforms to standards, registration requirements, frameworks, benchmarks and accreditation standards; is mobile; and is retained. While the standards referred to do include references to what is taught (curriculum) and teacher training addresses how it is taught (pedagogy), the language used is overwhelmingly managerial.

To this end, an important outcome from the National Partnership on Quality Teaching was the development of a set of *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2012), developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). We acknowledge that these standards can and do play an important role in ensuring that knowledge and skills required for good teaching practice are clearly articulated and available to teachers and school leaders. But in the standards, there is nothing about innovation, creativity or practice. It is all about conformance. There are standards there about community and parent engagement, but these are given relatively little weight compared to the other standards. Overall, the standards reflect the priority of knowledge and skills over character and values. Our point here is that the standards, as they are, do not address the particular requirements of remote teachers.

The definition of a quality teacher is difficult to pin down and the data to support the goal of having better quality teachers is almost non-existent. The key message to come out of the latest *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014) was that:

Teacher quality is considered the most important 'in-school' influence on student educational outcomes. However, no measures or data are currently available for reporting against this indicator. (p. 7.7)

This assertion is in part attributed to research which demonstrates that teaching contributes as much as 30% to student outcomes in schools (Hattie 2003, 2009). The Productivity Commission's Schools Workforce report (Productivity Commission 2012) skirted around definitions by focusing on precursors and outcomes. It sees the precursors as related to entry standards, professional development and mentoring and the outcomes as related to student performance. But it does not

define what quality is. Further, it, like other reports, mixes and matches concepts associated with teacher quality (i.e. teacher effectiveness) and quality teaching (i.e. effective teaching) as if they were part and parcel of the same thing (Darling-Hammond & Rothman 2011).

Is there any difference between teacher effectiveness in a high performing system and a low performing system, which is effectively what we are told remote education is? It is probably not earth-shattering, but sometimes the bleeding obvious needs to be stated: that 'the "attract, develop, recognise and retain" mantra recycles concepts of what it means to be a teacher in imaginaries that originate in the metropolis' (Shore et al. 2014a, p. 10).

And indeed there has been quite a bit of work done since the development of the Australian Professional Standards which seeks to contextualise the Standards for rural and remote contexts (Society for the Provision of Education for Rural Australia 2012), based on some solid research into what matters in these contexts (Lock 2008, Lock et al. 2009, Santoro et al. 2011b). Much of this research points to the need for a contextually responsive approach to teaching where the qualities required for teachers and graduates are identified outside the Professional Standards.

What does the RES evidence say?

The data presented here is a subset of data on teaching for success, which was discussed in [Chapter 8](#) (see also [Figure 21](#)).

What are quality remote teachers (or what qualities do they have)?

So what does the RES data tell us about the qualities that are required for successful teaching in remote schools? Table 6 shows what we found in relation to the qualities that respondents felt were important for remote teachers. Note firstly that a lot more non-remote responses identified teacher qualities than remote Aboriginal responses. However, the top two responses were the same for both remote Aboriginal respondents and for non-remote respondents. First and foremost, respondents identified a number of personal traits or qualities: being loving, caring and kind, being passionate, persistent and 'ruthlessly dedicated', among others. The second set of qualities were about relationships: being part of the community, talking and listening to community, using local languages and communicating with community.

As you can also see, non-remote respondents identified a number of qualities that were not discussed at all by remote Aboriginal respondents: 1) teachers being well experienced, 2) the teacher as a learner, and 3) teachers using culturally sensitive ways. Before we make too much of these differences, bear in mind that, overall, our data [for research question 3 came predominantly from non-remote respondents](#). The point is that what matters to teachers or non-remote stakeholders is not necessarily the same as what matters for locals.

red dirt

TABLE 6: CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY REMOTE TEACHERS (N=122)

CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY TEACHERS	INCLUDES	NON-REMOTE	REMOTE ABORIGINAL	ALL SOURCES
Teacher traits	Being loving and kind, not growling, respectful, patient, listening, commitment, passion, right attitude, ruthlessly dedicated, humour, caring, support, friendly, encouraging, persistence, energetic, wise	23	15	38
Relational qualities	Being part of the community, talking to and listening to community, use language, introducing themselves, communication	14	7	21
Use two-way approaches	Working together, roles for community members as teachers	4	3	7
Understands students	Concerns for the needs of individuals and develop expertise to understand student learning needs, and have the professional capacity to respond to these	3	2	5
Conflict management skills	Dealing with difficult behaviours	0	1	1
Helping kids be strong	Develop awareness, understanding and professional capacity to draw on resources in the community and school to strengthen identities	1	1	2
Having high expectations	Of achievement	0	1	1
Being organised	Planning	1	1	2
Using culturally sensitive ways	Using language, understanding families and aspirations	11	0	11
Experienced, well-prepared teachers	Specialised EALD skills, professional development inexperience	13	0	13
Using networks with employers	Giving students work experiences	1	0	1
Not frightened to break rules	Adapting to local contexts, innovative and creative	4	0	4
Prepared to stay	As opposed to high rates of staff turnover	2	0	2
The teacher as learner	Being open and adaptable, to act as a learning peer with other staff	12	0	12
Teaching basic skills	Helping young people be prepared for life	1	0	1
Youth can be an advantage	As opposed to experience	1	0	1
Total		91	31	122

Note: n represents the total number of references categorised under this heading; the numbers in the table refer to the number of times these themes were found in the data.

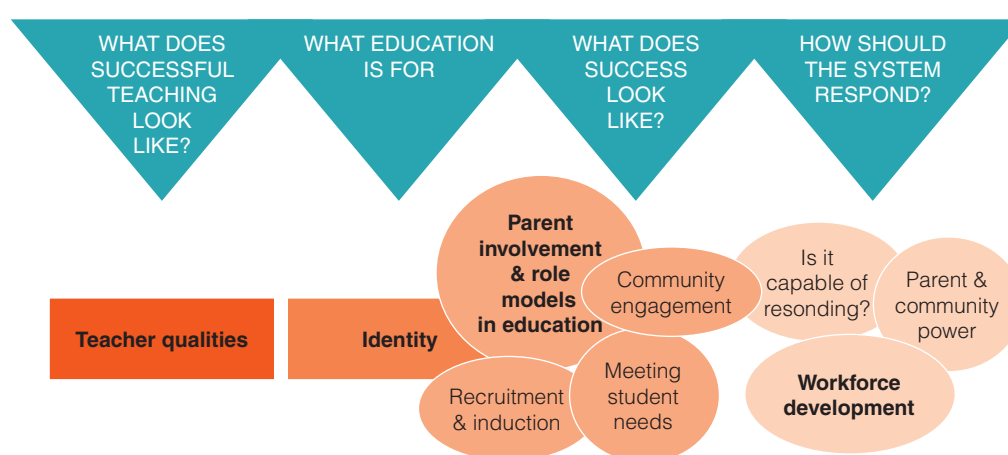
Click [here to see a selection of comments](#) from RES respondents.

These findings do not suggest that standards are not important—and clearly, knowledge and skills (particularly ESL skills) are important for successful teaching in remote schools. We might ask though, why does this focus on teacher qualities matter? Here again, RES analysis of what stakeholders say sheds light on this question. Part of our analysis has looked at what else shows up when people talk about what successful teaching looks like, in terms of what education is for, what success looks like and how the wider system should respond.

What follows from a focus on teacher qualities?

I've represented that analysis for teacher qualities in the model shown at Figure 23. We can understand it like this. If respondents commented on teacher qualities as '**teaching to success**', they also talked about the **purpose of education** being to support and strengthen student identity. At the same time, they talked about **educational success** defined primarily in terms of parent involvement and role models in education and to a lesser extent about recruitment and induction, meeting student needs and community engagement. And they also talked about **workforce development** and, to a lesser extent, about parent and community power, as appropriate system responses to this.

FIGURE 23: WHAT FOLLOWS ON FROM A FOCUS ON TEACHER QUALITIES?



What does this mean? It means that teachers who have the right qualities for remote education will support local aspirations for education, and the primary vehicle for improving teacher qualities is through workforce development and community empowerment strategies. Workforce development strategies will do two things in this regard. They will recruit teachers with the necessary qualities to make a difference, and they will underpin the importance of these qualities through professional learning processes and teacher preparation that nurtures these qualities and/or filters out those who do not have these qualities.

This is quite a different approach from one that seeks to recruit and promote on the basis of skills and knowledge criteria, which prevail in the Professional Standards and subsequently in selection criteria or competency-based professional development.

How can universities better prepare pre-service teachers for remote schools?

I want to focus here not so much on skills and knowledge, which are well catered for in university pre-service teacher courses, but on character and values. Skills and knowledge are important though, and an important finding from our research points to the need for better trained EAL/D teachers at the pre-service and post-graduate level. Pedagogy is also important, though the

concern of many respondents wasn't so much on formularised programs for teaching and learning. Rather, the focus was on contextually responsive approaches to teaching and learning which adapt to the needs of students and their communities.

The experiences that pre-service teachers have in university can make a huge difference to their preparedness for a remote context. We have seen many examples of universities that do this well. By way of example, I'd point here to CDU's Indigenous Knowledge Systems streams—particularly units on Yolngu language and culture—within the Bachelor of Teaching as a way of allowing learners to enter into a learning experience that helps them understand themselves, be tutored by Yolngu and be exposed to Yolngu language and culture.

We can also point here to community-based pre-service practicums. A number of universities do this well. Deakin University, for example, has a long-standing program that takes students from Victoria and gives them a month's experience on country in the Katherine region. The University of Melbourne also has a graduate teaching placement partnership with Yirrkala school. These offer opportunities for students who are about to graduate to learn in remote communities and engage with community members before they apply for a position. Other universities do similar things. These programs cost a lot of money. The way around that is to ask students who want this kind of experience to contribute to that cost. And they do.

How can systems better recruit and retain the kind of quality teachers that are required for the remote context?

It is one thing for universities to offer great preparation courses; perhaps a bigger issue is the need for systems to demand them. All jurisdictions offer incentives to attract staff to remote schools.

These incentives have traditionally included:

- transfer points (generally more points depending on remoteness)
- extended summer vacation (NSW only)
- additional professional development days (NSW and NT)
- 4–5 additional personal leave days (NSW, Qld, WA, NT)
- medical reimbursements (NSW)
- motor vehicle and depreciation allowances (NSW, WA)
- vacation travel subsidies (NSW, WA, NT)
- relocation subsidies (Vic., NSW, WA)
- travel assistance for family members (NT)
- utility connection payment (WA).

These strategies, which often translate into a significant financial benefit in the order of several thousand dollars per year, do well to attract staff to remote school locations. Some states offer a retention benefit for longer service.

The risk with these kind of incentives is that they attract a wide range of people, not necessarily people who are suited for remote-teaching service. Of course, recruitment and selection processes can filter those people out who aren't suitable, but staff turnover and recruitment remain key issues for systems (Lock et al. 2012).

One approach currently in development by the WA Department of Education involves the creation of standards for culturally responsive schools and culturally responsive teachers. While I caution the development of another set of competencies based on skills and knowledge, this approach

could make a difference as a guide for recruitment, professional development and school leadership accountability. On its own, it is no magic bullet though.

We have previously suggested the idea of ‘reverse credentialing’ as a means of addressing the skills and knowledge gaps for anyone working in remote communities. We are constantly told that the reason Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities don’t have jobs is their ‘lack’ of skills and qualifications. Unfortunately, this assertion does not really stack up, as some of our analysis of census data shows (Guenther 2013b). It turns out that about one-third of all non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in remote places have either no qualifications or no more than year 10 schooling. The real problem in remote communities is the lack of skills that non-locals have—that is, the lack of understanding of language, local culture and environment, relationships and protocols—and we believe that a good induction and professional development approach would allow local people to do the training for non-locals. The kind of credential that non-locals would get wouldn’t necessarily be a Certificate IV in cultural competency. Rather, it would be about providing a locally driven process that ensures non-locals have what they need to work effectively in the remote space.

What about boarding schools?

The increasing significance of boarding schools as an option for remote students means we need to think more carefully about the skills, knowledge and traits that staff bring to schools receiving students from remote locations. Boarding schools are not remote schools. And often (if not mostly), they bring remote students into an environment that is totally foreign to them.

In order for teachers to be successful in boarding schools (where remote kids are taught), I would argue that teachers need the same set of skills and traits (i.e. qualities) that a remote teacher needs. That is, they need to be passionate about their job, kind and caring, relational; operate in culturally sensitive ways; be prepared to learn from their students; and ideally be well prepared with appropriate EAL/D skills.

Boarding schools have a particular set of challenges though, particularly with regard to communicating with parents and being aware of the diverse set of social, community, environmental and language backgrounds that students come from. Schools need to give staff opportunity to engage with communities (e.g. by teachers visiting communities and allowing parents/family members to engage with the school when they are in town). Many boarding schools do this well. For example, the Worowa School, based in Healesville Victoria, supports parents to accompany their children to the school. While this is not necessarily going to guarantee that students will stay the distance, it does give teachers and parents the opportunity to establish some kind of relationship.

Let me be clear though, there is no single ‘best practice’ (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation 2015b) in relation to boarding schools and the way they work with students. Good schools will adapt to the needs of their student cohort in a way that suits them. Similarly, quality teachers will adapt the way they teach and relate to the students according to the students they have and the communities they come from. Let me also be clear, that students who go to an ‘elite’ boarding school may not get the quality education they need. Elite schools have a role to play of course, but the challenges they face in supporting remote students are tremendous. However, resources do make a difference and to the extent that those schools are able to equip teachers to be the best they can for their students, then their work is critically important.

Digging deeper

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Osborne, S. (2014). Puṭuṇa kulini: The trouble with 'hearing'. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 10(1), 3-14.

Video links

Watch a short introduction to this topic



Watch Sam Osborne talk about the need for resilience and other qualities in remote school leaders



S4.

School and system responses

Having heard what remote Aboriginal people say about what is important in remote education, we now turn to system responses and what they might look like. Topics covered include:

C10: Contextually and culturally responsive schools

C11: Language teaching and learning

C12: Workforce development for remote schools

C13: Community engagement in remote schools



C10: CONTEXTUALLY AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOLS

Chapter overview

Over the last few years, approaches to schooling in Australia have become increasingly standardised and codified. The standardisation of schooling is reflected in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, an Australian Curriculum, the *Australian Education Act 2013* and standardised testing through the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). We have also seen the establishment of a national Early Years Learning Framework. These changes have had a profound effect on the way that schools operate and the ways that teachers teach. In the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia, many of these measures are designed at least in part to ‘Close the Gap’ between educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In terms of closing gaps, the results of these initiatives have been unspectacular—even disappointing. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from very remote communities where, over the last eight years (since the **My School** website began reporting), little if anything has changed. Attendance rates, academic performance and retention rates remain well below national benchmarks.

Does any of this actually matter? Standards and benchmarks are created by people thousands of kilometres and culturally even more distant from remote schools with a particular view of what education is for. If we turned the gap closing agenda on its head and asked local people in remote communities what was important to them for a successful education, what would they say? This is exactly the point of the CRC-REP’s Remote Education Systems (RES) project. Findings from the RES research suggests that successful teaching has almost nothing to do with teacher quality, standardised testing, national curricula or any other national framework. Rather, as this chapter reveals, remote education stakeholders see the need for culturally and contextually sensitive approaches to schooling that fit the purposes of education as they see them. Drawing mainly on qualitative data from over 1000 stakeholders, the chapter will discuss what this means for remote education systems in Australia and how to improve outcomes for remote students.

Key messages

- To be successful, remote schools need teachers who can work in ways that are contextually and culturally responsive.
- Contextually responsive teachers bring a degree of self-reflexivity to their roles in schools and communities, being aware of the differences that present to them within the context and responding with flexibility.
- Culturally responsive teachers are those who understand their own culture, privilege the culture in which they work; facilitate use of local languages and involve local knowledge in teaching and learning.

What does the literature say?

Over the years, many people have tried to articulate and put into practice what they mean by education that is sensitive to the local context. What might be ‘culturally appropriate’ in one generation may not be so in the next, depending on who is delivering it. For example, missionaries delivering education at Hermannsburg, central Australia, in the late 1800s would probably not be considered ‘culturally sensitive’ today, even though they learned and taught children in the local language. But nor would the educators of the newly established boarding schools in the early 1970s—Yirra College in Alice Springs, Kormilda College in Darwin, or Dhupuma College near Yirrkala (see Lee et al. 2014, p. for some detail about the history of NT schools). Likewise, it would be considered an insult to those Stolen Generation children who experienced education at the Bungalow in Alice Springs, or at Retta Dixon Home in Darwin or at Croker Island to suggest that their education was culturally appropriate (Gray & Beresford 2008, Haebich et al. 2002). Rather, the emphasis was about becoming insensitive to culture and responsive to the demands of the dominant culture. While this might sound a bit extreme, the thinking today is often that education that is targeted for or specifically catering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is, by virtue of that fact, ‘culturally responsive’. Certainly the motives of most people providing education to or for remote students (perhaps with a few exceptions) historically did not come from a desire to be culturally responsive. Osborne, argues that for Anangu at least:

Attitudes of disdain fuelled by 19th century Social Darwinist notions gave way to assimilation and integration as prevailing ideologies in the early 20th century. The removal of children, particularly with lighter skin from their mothers, with the view to absorb them into dominant culture society was so comprehensive, this policy period which continued until the 1970s came to be known as the ‘Stolen Generation’. (Osborne 2015, p. 133)

In the 1970s, a ‘bilingual education’ movement began which took hold in many remote schools of the Northern Territory. Lee et al. note (2014): ‘When the Australian Government set up the bilingual program in the 1970s, the primary goal related to language and culture’. But by ‘1980, the Northern Territory Department of Education had changed the order of these goals to put English language skills before Indigenous language skills’ (p. 65). At the same time, ideas about ‘two ways’ (Harris 1990) and ‘both ways’ (Yunupingu 1999) education began to take root in many communities and schools. The ideas were about mutual obligation, reciprocity and give and take (Lee et al. 2014, p. 57). ‘Both ways’ is now (and has for some time been) at the core of Batchelor Institute’s educational philosophy (Ober & Bat 2007), which in turn translates into practice. Chirgwin and Huijser (2015) suggest that in both-ways teaching and learning ‘there is no need to compromise either epistemological position, but rather a new space can come into being that supports the creation of new understandings and knowledge’ (p. 337). Other academics—particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics—espouse similar views (Arbon 2008b, Nakata et al. 2012, Sarra 2011, Yunkaporta 2009), promoting pedagogies that create knowledge generatively (Christie 2013) without needing to take one cultural position or another. Many of these philosophical ideas have been generated outside compulsory schooling, but they resonate with teachers in schools as they grapple with the issues of curriculum, pedagogy, governance and epistemology more generally (Minutjukur et al. 2014b, Osborne et al. 2013).

Many of the contemporary discourses about remote education seemingly ignore these rich discourses about the potential for culturally and contextually responsive models of education. Instead, what we hear is talk about ‘disadvantage’, ‘closing gaps’, deficits and failure (Abbott 2014, Hughes & Hughes 2012a, Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision

2014). And with this sad discourse come equally sad solutions, which end up generating resistance and which fall over despite the initial magic bullet fanfare at their introduction. Initiatives such as National Partnership Agreements, the Northern Territory Emergency Response, Accelerated Literacy, the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure, Smarter Schools, the National Alliance for Remote Indigenous Schools and so many more have all been found wanting in their evaluations (Atelier Learning Solutions 2012, Department Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2012, Gray 2007, Wright et al. 2012) despite the billions of dollars poured into them.

Apart from ignoring the principles of both ways, as I outlined earlier, the problem with many programs that are delivered into communities and schools is that they are built on false premises: for example, that teachers make the most difference (Hattie 2003), that improving attendance will improve outcomes (Guenther 2013a), that the 'key' to economic participation is education and training (Guenther 2013b), that there are no jobs in communities (McRae-Williams & Guenther 2014) and that being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and being remote is a disadvantage (Guenther et al. 2013). These false assumptions then lead to solutions that take people out of communities to boarding schools for a 'quality education' (Penfold 2014, Wilson 2014) and that invest in solutions like 'direct instruction', which assume that what works in one place will work in another. But perhaps the major problem with these top-down approaches is—unlike both ways or two ways—their attempt to maintain dominant culture control and power, with little upward accountability when they fail (Rizvi & Lingard 2010).

The point is that current policy-level thinking takes us away from approaches that are truly respectful of local cultures, language and identities connected to land, kinship and the enduring cosmologies on which they are based. I would suggest that (despite what some may say), 'best practice' in boarding schools (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation 2015b) is a myth. Closing the gap is not about meeting in the middle, it's about meeting at the Western end of a continuum that sees value in Western cultures and little more than dysfunction, despair and failure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. But the irony, as I have suggested earlier, is that virtually every initiative tried in the past has failed despite the apparent hegemony of the state to effect change. Nothing has changed (Guenther 2013c). The reality is that neither Western nor Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultures have all the answers. That's why both-ways approaches to education (or their many culturally and contextually responsive variants) are important to our thinking and practice in education. The research I present here gives the view from the perspective of remote education stakeholders, particularly the perspectives of locals who live and belong in remote communities.



What does the evidence say?

What does it mean to be contextually responsive?

Table 7 summarises how respondents talked about contextually responsive teaching. Overall, this is not an important issue for remote Aboriginal respondents. Why? Because by and large they do not have to ‘respond’ to the context as non-remote stakeholders do. The handful of comments they do make are about how non-locals should or should not respond to their context.

But for non-locals, the difference of the context they find themselves in stands out. As such they firstly describe reflexively, how they should or shouldn’t respond (mostly as teachers). To some extent this is a reflection of their separate positions or identities—separate from parents, students, language and community. Some describe this in terms of complexity (see [Chapter 4](#)), because for them it is a complex system they find themselves in. Some describe their response in terms of respecting and understanding different knowledge systems and definitions related to aspects of a successful education. **In summary, contextually responsive teachers bring a degree of self-reflexivity to their roles in schools and communities, being aware of the differences that present to them within the context and responding with flexibility.**

TABLE 7: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CONTEXTUALLY RESPONSIVE? (N=125)

THEMES RELATED TO BEING CONTEXTUALLY RESPONSIVE	DESCRIPTORS	REMOTE ABORIGINAL	NON-REMOTE	ALL SOURCES
Flexible teachers, curriculum and pedagogy	Adaptable teachers, humour, schools, learning teachers, EAL/D skilled, patient	4	31	35
Context of learning environment	Responding to opportunities in the local context, importance of place, making learning meaningful	4	17	21
Context of the student	Importance of safety, relationships, health, meeting student needs	3	16	19
Context of language and culture	Connecting to Aboriginal terms, ways of thinking	3	11	14
Meeting community expectations	Recognise the aspirations and expectations of parents and communities for children	0	10	10
Understanding knowledge systems	Recognising the difference between Western and local knowledge systems	0	8	8
Context of complexity	Competing expectations of the various elements of a complex system	0	6	6
Contextual definitions	Being aware of local application for standards, what is success?, avoiding assumptions, understanding local concepts	0	6	6
Other meanings for ‘contextually responsive’	Situational, one size doesn’t fit all, flexible education endpoints, developmental disadvantage, context of change	0	6	6
Totals		14	111	125

What does it mean to be culturally responsive?

In Table 8, we have combined the result that appear in the 'Teaching to success' chart (Figure 21) as 'both ways and two ways' and 'culturally responsive'. Conceptually, these two themes are connected. Of note is the proportion of remote Aboriginal responses, which is much higher than for 'contextually responsive' teaching. More than two-thirds of the 52 responses from remote Aboriginal respondents belong under three themes: **language and culture**, **both ways and two ways**, and **cultural awareness**. In terms of the former, responses recognised the centrality of language and culture as an essential component of successful teaching (see Chapter 6 for more on this). The theme of 'cultural awareness' was raised in a number of ways, but not as a product of some kind of training. In summary, culturally responsive teachers are those who understand their own culture, privilege the culture in which they work, facilitate use of local languages and involve local knowledge in teaching and learning.

TABLE 8: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE? (N=155)

THEMES RELATED TO BEING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE	DESCRIPTORS AND EXAMPLES	REMOTE ABORIGINAL	NON-REMOTE	ALL SOURCES
Both ways or two ways	Creating generative spaces, knowledge exchanges, accreditation, privileging local knowledge, sharing learning, respect	21	36	57
Language and culture	Teach kinship, drawing on the centrality of learning language and culture, cultural maintenance	10	16	26
Cultural awareness	Understanding, sensitive, competence, self-aware, asking questions, appropriateness	7	7	14
Local elders involved	Elders involved in teaching and decision-making, teachers learning from elders	3	6	9
Recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander norms and values	Respect for local ways of being and valuing	3	5	8
Recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advantage	Promote pride and respect, celebrate e.g. NAIDOC	3	3	6
Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of teaching and learning	Stories and out-of-school learning	2	7	9
Use local ecology and environment	Concept of country, learning on country	2	5	7
Adopt both-ways philosophy	Community involved in decisions about content	1	5	6
Community taught inductions	Locals teaching non-locals	0	2	2
Local role models	Drawing on community and family role models	0	6	6
Other culturally responsive approaches	Young people as teachers, school as an incentive for participation in rites of passage, community-taught inductions	0	5	5
Totals		52	103	155

What did RES respondents actually say about this?

Read a selection of what respondents had to say about **both ways or two ways, language and culture** and about **cultural awareness**.

What does being culturally or contextually responsive mean for schools and systems?

Part of our analysis has looked at what else shows up when people talk about what successful teaching looks like, in terms of what education is for, what success looks like and how the wider system should respond.

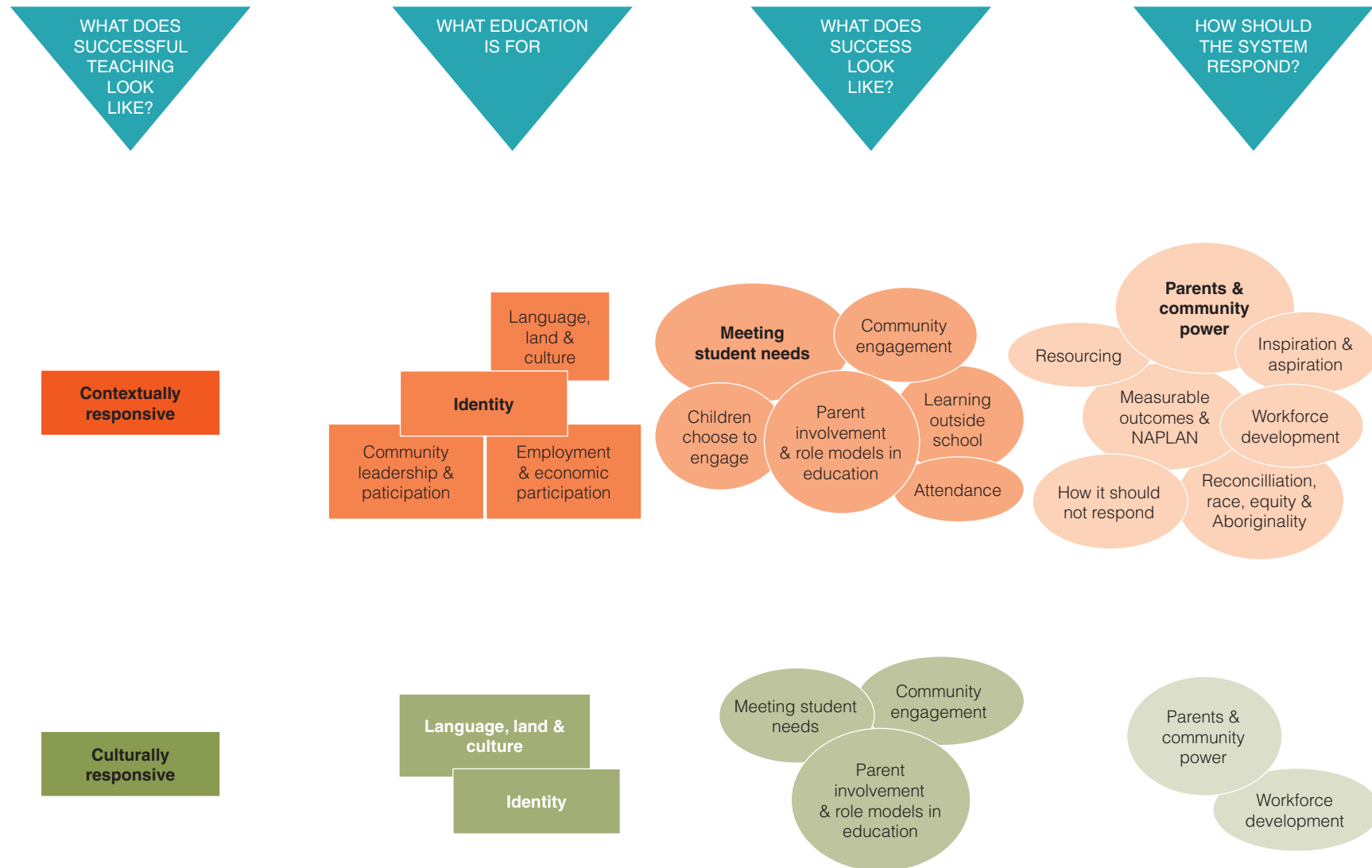
I've represented that analysis for cultural and contextually responsive remote teaching in the model shown (Figure 24). We will explain it like this. If respondents commented on **contextually responsive teaching** as '**teaching to success**', they also talked about the **purpose of education** being to **support and strengthen student identity** first and then language, land and culture; economic participation; and community leadership/participation. At the same time, they talked about success defined primarily in terms of **meeting student needs** first, then parent involvement and role models in education and engagement. And at the same time they also talked about **building parent and community power**, as the main appropriate system responses to this. For those talking about successful remote teaching in terms of being culturally responsive, the issues they raised in terms of success, purpose and system response were quite similar, with varying emphases. So while being culturally responsive and being contextually responsive conceptually mean different things, the reasons for teaching these ways are very similar, the outcomes are very similar, and how systems achieve these outcomes is very similar.

We would suggest that while non-remote respondents (proportionally) tended to talk more about contextual responsiveness and remote Aboriginal respondents (proportionally) tended to talk more about cultural responsiveness, in effect they are two sides of the same coin. Remote and non-remote stakeholders are in broad agreement about what needs to be done to make remote schools successful in this regard.

What they want is an education that supports the identity, language, land and culture imperatives of local people. They see success defined in terms of meeting student needs and having parents and role models involved in their children's education. And they want a system to respond by building parent and community power.



FIGURE 24: WHAT DOES BEING CULTURALLY AND CONTEXTUALLY RESPONSIVE MEAN?



Implementing culturally and contextually responsive education

That all sounds straightforward and logical. But it does not match what we are told is meant to happen. Overwhelmingly, we are told that **education is about attendance** and ultimately preparing young people for work (Guenther & Bat 2013). We are told that **success means higher NAPLAN scores, retention to year 12 and transition into training, further education or employment** (Guenther 2015, Guenther et al. 2014a). And the system response is replete with examples of initiatives that disempower, take young people out of communities for education (to places where culturally and contextually responsive teaching and learning certainly are not guaranteed) and which actively attempt to acculturate students to accept and adopt the values and norms of Western societies (Guenther et al. 2013).

There is a real problem in all of this for **boarding schools**, which are seen to be the solution to the problem of remote education, most notably by prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders (ABC 2013, Pearson 2014). Indeed, many remote parents have bought into this solution. But many remote parents would be caught in a bind here. How can a boarding school, which is so remote from the centre of their world, effectively achieve the purposes of a good education? How could the lack of options other than boarding as suggested by Wilson (2014) and the resulting NT Department of Education's Indigenous Education Strategy (Northern Territory Department of Education 2015b) be empowering for parents (Benveniste et al. 2015, 2014)? One of the problems with boarding strategies is that we just do not know much about how well they work for remote students and what they achieve. We do not know how many students from remote schools go to boarding schools. We do not know how long they stay or even how many boarding schools they go to. We do not know whether boarding schools accelerate the academic performance of students. We do not know where students go after boarding. And we do not know the impact of the loss of young people to boarding schools and whether or not they return. We do not know the full psychological impact of separation on kids (Mander 2012, Mander et al. 2015). While we are told it's all good—don't worry—has anyone bothered to find out?

There are some pretty straightforward solutions to the issues we have raised here for remote schools.



Firstly, if community and parent power are important elements to a system response, surely we would build structures into schools that demand the inclusion of local voice in the governance of schools. Having an operational school council in some instances would be a start. Ensuring that (like other school councils in urbanised parts of Australia) the council has parents and community members on board would be logical.

Secondly, you would ensure that as many local people were employed at a school as non-locals. We know that local employment makes a difference to educational outcomes, and it doesn't have to be teaching assistants or teachers. It could be the bus driver, the receptionist, the grounds person or people who come in to prepare school lunches or breakfasts.

Thirdly, you would have local elders actively involved in building a contextually responsive curriculum. You would have regular bush trips where senior locals would be the educators, teaching from their local and traditional knowledge.

Fourthly, you would ensure that your local staff were given appropriate professional learning opportunities, to the same extent that non-locals have. You'd be supporting and encouraging (if not demanding) non-locals and locals to work collaboratively.

Finally, school leaders would be held to account for their ability to achieve these goals. You would be measuring these things and reporting on them back to departments of education AND to communities. None of this is rocket science, and there are examples we have seen that do this quite well, particularly in the independent school sector, but we could also share examples of how it can work in the larger bureaucracies of the government and Catholic sectors.

What stands out for me in the results that I have shared here, is that being culturally responsive, contextually responsive or operating in a both-ways environment is about adopting some fundamental practice principles built on underpinning assumptions of respect, shared knowledge, working together and the primacy of local culture and language over Western values and English. It certainly isn't about closing the gap. It's not a programmatic response. There is no formula to follow. It requires non-local people coming in to remote communities to teach, to be honestly reflexive and recognise their cultures as different but certainly not superior. It's not outcome-driven. Rather, it is relational and process-driven. It works constructively towards the goals of justice and reconciliation.



Digging deeper

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Video links

Watch a short video that introduces this topic



Watch Sam Osborne talk about what really matters for remote communities and their schools: lessons for non-local teachers



Watch a talking PowerPoint from Lecture #7, Culturally and contextually responsive schools



C11: LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Chapter overview

This chapter discusses results from Research Question 3: ‘How does teaching need to change in order to achieve “success”?’ Half of the responses related to languages teaching and learning, highlighting the importance of first/Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language and English as an additional language teaching and learning programs. Language is at the heart of learning, and remote Aboriginal and non-remote respondents stressed the need for contextually relevant teaching, curriculum and assessment programs. The findings resonate with current literature on second language acquisition and teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) literature, which increasingly encourages practitioners and systems to recognise language learners as bi/multilinguals, adding languages and language skills to their diverse repertoires. The chapter discusses the role of teacher standards to serve the needs of remote Aboriginal students. It focuses on two new documents that map the standards: the *Capability Framework – Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D learners* (Department of Education Training and Employment 2014) and the *Elaborations of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: For use when working with learners of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D)* (Australian Council of TESOL Associations 2015).

Key messages

- Remote Aboriginal and non-remote respondents identified language teaching and learning, contextually relevant teaching, curriculum and assessment programs as important to success in education.
- Frameworks mapped to teacher standards have been developed for English as an Additional Language/Dialect speaking students, along with policy and resourcing to support teachers to address languages teaching and learning in remote schools.
- Themes such as relationships and student safety and wellbeing at school were also important for successful teaching.

What does the literature say?

Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and many students living in rural and urban locations, develop language in complex multilingual linguistic settings (Angelo & Carter 2015, Simpson & Wigglesworth 2008). Linguistic research has shown the complex and hybrid nature of contemporary language repertoires, as young people are frequently speakers of contemporary language varieties, such as varieties of Aboriginal English, local creole varieties and mixed languages, as well as traditional languages, to varying levels of proficiency in dynamic and fragile language ecologies (Meakins 2010, Morrison & Disbray 2008, O’Shannessy 2008, Sellwood & Angelo 2012). This complexity has long been recognised within education departments and the Australian Government (Commonwealth of Australia 1992, 2012; Department of Education Western Australia 2012; State of Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011; Wilson 2014)

but is rarely acknowledged in policy or enacted in practice. Over decades, reports and research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education have stressed the need for high-quality ESL instruction. They have also recognised the importance of first language to strengthen student identity, meet community aspirations for academic learning of home languages and cultures and as a means to develop formal learning and for second language learning (Disbray 2015a, 2015b; Purdie et al. 2008, pp. 190-93). Education systems and communities have, in pockets, developed responses to support languages teaching and learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Angelo undated, Angelo & Carter 2015, Department of Education Government of Western Australia 2012, Disbray 2014, 2015a; The State of Queensland Department of Education and Training 2010 undated), yet these efforts often lack sustained support, teacher training and resourcing (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2008, p. 101).

Second language acquisition and teaching English to speakers of other languages

Research on Second Language Acquisition in recent decades has prompted and reflected shifts in thinking about language teaching and learning, which increasingly recognise the 'multi-competence' of diverse language learners, with implications for pedagogy, teacher preparation and practice (Cook 2008, May 2014, Ortega 2013). This work stems from deepened understandings of language learning as both an individual cognitive process and one of social cognition, to which learners, as members of existing speech communities, bring their identity, knowledge and skills including linguistic ones, as well as motivations for adding a further language to their repertoire (Firth & Wagner 2007, García & Sylvan 2011, May 2011). Approaches incorporating these crucial aspects argue for Second Language Acquisition and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) to be understood as processes of additive bi/multilingualism. These accounts are critical of monolingual approaches to teaching and learning, as they isolate the individual learner and their development of the dominant language from their broader linguistic development. Monolingual approaches recognise neither the realities of their language use nor the language learning needs of developing bi/multilinguals (de Jong & Harper 2005, Firth & Wagner 1997, Harper & de Jong 2004). According to Johnson and Kachru:

[I]n bi-/multilingual contexts, the acquisition of linguistic competence interfaces with the acquisition of sociocultural competence in the use of all the codes in the repertoire of the individuals, whatever their age. In such communities no one language or code is appropriate in all domains. The use of the codes depends on the speech events, activities, interlocutors, topics, levels of formality, and so forth. In some contexts code mixing and code switching are appropriate. (Johnson & Kachru 1994, p. 798)

To support the language learning needs of developing bi/multilinguals, recent Second Language Acquisition and TESOL literature promotes teachers' understanding of bi/multilingual development and the individual learner's language background, fostering use of first language to support learning language and concept learning in that language, understanding of the structure of the language(s) they are responsible for teaching and teaching in and the language demands of particular content areas and learning tasks (de Jong & Harper 2005, de Jong et al. 2013, García et al. 2008, García & Sylvan 2011, Harper & de Jong 2004, May 2011).

Finally, TESOL research literature is unequivocal about the need for educators to attend to student's second language mastery, in this discussion, English language mastery. Students must learn to derive meaning, express themselves, think and learn in English (de Courcy et al. 2012, Hoff 2009, McIntosh et al. 2012, Snow et al. 1998). This requires teacher expertise in teaching all

sub-systems of English: phonology (sounds), morphology (word formation), syntax (structures), lexis (vocabulary), semantics (meanings), pragmatics (social usages), texts (communicating in oral, visual and literate modes) (Angelo and Carter 2015, p. 134). Language learning is the crucial prerequisite for literacy development. Yet in remote schools and other schools, language learning has become subsumed under literacy learning, as high-stakes literacy testing has come to drive measures of student learning and school performance (de Jong 2013, Harper and de Jong 2004, McIntosh et al. 2012).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and first language teaching and learning

Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are taught in some schools in a number of states and territories in Australia (Disbray 2015a, Hobson et al. 2010). A range of program types meet the needs of diverse learners and language situations: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are learners of a revitalised language as their heritage language, non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students learning a local language (usually also a revitalisation context) and students who are speakers of a still-vibrant language instructed in their own language, as is the case, for instance in a small number of Northern Territory schools that operate bilingual education programs (Disbray 2014, 2015b; Hartman & Henderson 1994).

A number of rationales motivate support for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in schools. One draws on the notion of the 'social good', whereby education systems and individual schools support the maintenance, revitalisation and rebuilding of these languages to support people in maintaining a sense of self and their culture of heritage. In this framing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and culture programs provide an opportunity for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to achieve greater intercultural understanding (Purdie et al. 2008, p. 191, Rigney 2002). These rationales underpin the newly developed Australian Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (ACARA 2011, p. 17).

red dirt



The connection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages activities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and community wellbeing is a key finding of a number of studies (Biddle & Swee 2012, Commonwealth of Australia 2012, Purdie et al. 2000). According to the 2014 National Languages Survey, language activities are 'not just aimed at increasing speaker numbers and revitalising or maintaining languages, they are also about helping people to connect with language and culture and improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' (Marmion et al. 2014, p. xii). The House of Representatives 2012 report on languages in education lists social and emotional wellbeing, along with improved health outcomes, school–community partnership building and improved student engagement as benefits of language in schools programs (Commonwealth of Australia 2012), and these aspects are articulated in the current federal Closing the Gap policy documents (Australian Government 2013). Despite this, language programs are not widespread in schools, and where they operate, they tend to be limited to an hour or so per week, with little connection to the broader school program (Disbray 2015a, 2015b).

Although many traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are no longer spoken as languages of everyday communication, in remote areas of Australia approximately 12 languages continue to be acquired as first languages by children. In addition, many children acquire contemporary languages as their first language: varieties of Aboriginal English, Creole varieties and mixed languages, or a combination of these along with traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages (Dixon 2015; Malcolm 2011; Meakins 2008; Morrison & Disbray 2008; O'Shannessy 2008, 2015). A number of programs have sought to teach, and teach through, students' home language, most notably the Northern Territory Bilingual program, or to draw on home language to teach Standard Australian English. The Western Australian Two-Way learning program is one example (Department of Education Government of Western Australia 2012). Angelo and Carter detail the Language Perspectives program developed by Queensland Education (2015, pp. 129–30) and the need to scaffold understandings about multilingualism in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts in Queensland. For this, the project developed the 'Three-way strong' model. The model reflects and responds to the rich and complex language and learning contexts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, where traditional/heritage languages, contemporary contact varieties and Standard Australian English all exist. As well as highlighting 'three kinds of language (at least) in most Indigenous students' linguistic repertoires', the model suggests 'the differential role educators might play in supporting each' (p. 130). Results from the RES project resonate with many of the points raised in the literature.



What does the RES evidence say?

Language teaching and learning has emerged as a significant theme in response to Question 3: *How does teaching need to change in order to achieve 'success'?* Half of the 1052 responses related to language matters; of these, 299 references came from remote Aboriginal respondents and 753 from non-remote respondents. The responses by non-remote respondents are overwhelmingly from educators in remote schools, as they tended to provide lengthy and rich responses relating to teaching. Other elements of successful teaching are reported in [Chapter 8](#) (see [Figure 21: Teaching to success](#)).

TABLE 9: SUCCESSFUL TEACHING IN REMOTE SCHOOLS: FOCUS ON LANGUAGE-RELATED RESPONSES

WHAT DOES TEACHING TO SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?	SOURCES CODED	REMOTE ABORIGINAL (N = 299)	NON-REMOTE (N = 753)	REMOTE ABORIGINAL	NON-REMOTE	ALL REFERENCES (N=1052, %)
Language-related responses only						
ESL & multilingual learning	37	30	82	10%	11%	112 (10.6%)
Local language-speaking Aboriginal teachers	25	35	41	12%	5%	76 (7.2%)
Contextually responsive	37	11	83	4%	11%	94 (9%)
Pedagogy	33	25	53	8%	7%	78 (7.4%)
Culturally responsive	29	25	43	8%	6%	68 (6.4%)
Contextualised curriculum	26	25	38	8%	5%	63 (5.9%)
Both-ways and two-way approaches	26	21	36	7%	5%	57 (5.4%)
Total language-related responses		172	376	57%	50%	548 (52%)
Other aspects of successful teaching		127	377	43%	50%	504 (48%)
Total references		299	753	100%	100%	1052

Language-related responses

Some comments centred on explicit English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teaching and learning, by teachers aware of the processes and demands of second language learning:

Learning to speak English, learning the sounds by learning a lot of words, meaningful words, having a vocabulary, understanding that when you learn a word like 'to jump', the actual like 'to jump a queue' or 'jump in the car' or 'jump straight to page 3' and all of those extended meanings, you've got all of that additional knowledge that if we don't really build that up. (NT remote educator)

Until you learn a second language, you really don't understand language. I know when I learned English right through, went through university whatever, and it was only when I started learning Pitjantjatjara that I kind of understood how languages work. You don't really understand your own language, you absorb it. (Remote South Australian educator)

References to pedagogy, contextually responsive programs, contextualised curriculum and 'both ways' or 'two ways' approaches raised issues of effective teaching and assessment in terms of the roles and value of students' entire linguistic repertoire, and the role of first language in learning, and in literacy development. Concerns about the lack of EAL/D teaching practice that recognises learners and their language repertoires and learning needs were frequent:

I think it's really important to acknowledge the place that literacy should play in first language, first. What we ask students on a daily basis is to skip multiple developmental levels in having to acquire the understanding of a concept, different phonology, orthography, all of these different things by trying to teach them English literacy without really doing any of the other work that could give them a firmer foundation in the literate understanding. (Remote South Australian educator)

Teachers don't have knowledge of English grammar let alone grammar for kids who might come into school not speaking English. Teachers in general and I know some teachers have a meta language to talk about and understand the grammar of English ... That's a big gap in our capacity as teachers of EAL/D learners. (NT Curriculum Officer)

Educators highlighted the lack of experience and skill among teaching staff to meet the language learning needs of EAL/D students and the lack of professional learning, both pre- and in-service (see also Abu-Duhou et al. 2006, pp. 10-11):

They're always repeating, they're not always being pushed. It's like language classes and doing language teaching. You have all these new ones coming in and you have to go back to the start. Some children go through our language programs in primary school and can still only speak a few sentences. (Educator from remote South Australia)

We're working with students who have English as a second language ... I think it's sad that we're looking at uplifting Aboriginal kids who are in this as [a] second language [speakers] and we've got kids [young teachers] who don't know the first thing about teaching them. (Educator from Kimberley, WA)

The NAPLAN testing regime, already critiqued widely in the literature with respect to EAL/D learners generally (Creagh 2014; Cross 2009, 2011) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D learners in particular (Angelo 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Wigglesworth et al. 2011), represented a great pressure and source of frustration for many educators in the study:

We measure it all, we're continually trying to measure it by national standards. It's just totally impossible, can't happen. It can't be measured that way. We keep on never really acknowledging that national testing is made for middle-class white kids ... The only time

these children face English is in the classroom at school or in the schoolyard when teachers are talking to them, if they have to ask for something at the shop or ask for something at clinic. Other than that they speak their own language all the time ... the stated goals, measured by NAPLAN, national testing ... they're unrealistic for the context. The context isn't taken into account. (Remote NT Principal)

References to local teachers, who are speakers of the children's home language(s), were strongly represented, particularly for their role in supporting students to comprehend and engage with instructional talk and content. Local educators were positioned as an integral part of two-way learning: the development and delivery of contextualised pedagogy, their role as a link between non-local staff and families, their community and local knowledge. There were also comments on the need for their active engagement in classrooms and on working in tandem with non-local staff to ensure student wellbeing and safety:

They need AEW [Aboriginal Education Workers] there to help teachers – both ways – they listen when you talking in English they know. That's really hard, question listening and hearing is hard. (Community survey response)

Remote Aboriginal teachers also expressed their awareness and concern for children's first language proficiency for their adult lives, focusing on first language learning as an end in itself:

Some of the words from old days are hard but still we want younger ones to learn. There are teenagers and young people who are married with kids who don't understand and don't use those words. (Warlpiri educator, NT)

Many references to contextually responsive programs, contextualised curriculum and both-ways/two-ways approaches echoed the broader conceptualisation of additive bi/multilingualism discussed in the literature above, in terms of the roles and value of students' entire linguistic repertoire, with insight into the nature of bi/multilingualism:

I think it's a bit funny as well to imagine you can split your identities and be bidialectal or bilingual. You've got an English side and you've got a creole side and not one [identity], I find that interesting. (Remote NT educator)

Anangu have important stories for the children to learn, the dreaming tjukurpa, the land, family connections, culture and other learning. This is our foundation. If we are going to teach this new curriculum we must build it on top of the foundation that is already there. When we bring these two together, we will make it easier for our children to learn. Our children must learn our way first and then later they can learn in the different language. So if we want to close the gaps, we must change the way we teach the curriculum and this will help the children to learn. (APY educator)

Some educators reflected on the need for teaching and learning to better use the funds of knowledge that students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members have, which students might capitalise on in their post-school lives:

We can teach the kids to work in tourism on homelands. The school can teach the children to practise (what to say) in English to the

tourists. This is why we need to teach the kids the language for the environment in English and Pitjantjatjara. Schools can do this. This approach prepares students for the money side (business/employment) and builds confidence, particularly in speaking English.
(Teacher, APY lands)

Finally, remote Aboriginal respondents, educators and community members stressed the need for equal respect for their language and culture:

Make sure you tell them to be equal with us because we are equal to them. The government wants us to learn Kardiya (non-Aboriginal) way but they don't learn Yapa way. 'Two way' learning is about respect; we respect English, they have to respect our language. They say 'two way' but they don't learn. We all need to learn two way, Kardiya and Yapa because we are both equal.

What does this all mean?

The findings for the RES project on language matters highlight a number of shortfalls in languages education provision for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Generally, little time or resourcing is dedicated to home and heritage languages teaching and learning, despite reports and research that highlight their importance (Commonwealth of Australia 2012, Disbray 2015a). While some long-standing Aboriginal language programs exist, programs are frequently vulnerable to changes in system and local level policy and resourcing. The new **Australian Curriculum - Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages** may prove important to lifting the profile and prestige of Australian languages; however, an implementation strategy with sustained commitment and resourcing is yet to be seen.

Approaches that draw on home language for learning, such as **Language Perspectives** (The State of Queensland Department of Education and Training 2010 or the Northern Territory Bilingual program, are also vulnerable to mainstream, monolingual approaches. The Western Australian Two-Way program, which focuses on Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English learning through code comparison and awareness, appears to have more sustained support (Department of Education Government of Western Australia undated-b). While this program satisfies awareness raising and respect for Aboriginal English, it may not equip teachers with the skills and resources for English language teaching and learning.

With respect to EAL/D teaching, learning and assessment, international and Australian Second Language Acquisition and TESOL research articulate misconceptions and policy and practice misfits for EAL/D learners underlying these shortfalls. Misconceptions include the notions that exposure and interaction will lead to English language learning; that all additional language learners learn at the same rate; literacy teaching will lead to language learning and that English as a Second Language pedagogy is just 'good pedagogy' (Angelo 2013c, Angelo & Carter 2015, Harper & de Jong 2004, McTaggart & Curro 2009, Moore 2007). Most Australian state and territory education departments have policy guidelines for EAL/D, some aligned to the **Australian Curriculum EAL/D**, but these often focus resources on students from overseas backgrounds (Education Queensland, see Angelo & Carter 2015 p.130, Government of South Australia Department of Education and Child Development 2016) and/or lack reference to specific programs for remote EAL/D learners (Northern Territory Government 2015) or sustained support for well-designed programs.

Following the introduction of **Australian Professional Standards for Teachers**, two documents have been developed to map specific EAL/D skills, qualities and practices to the professional standards:

The *Capability Framework – Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D* (Department of Education Training and Employment 2014) and the *Elaborations of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: For use when working with learners of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D)* (Australian Council of TESOL Associations 2015). The former is specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the other for EAL/D learners more generally. Both map a continuum of career stages in EAL/D teaching and have the potential to influence systemic responses for more effective teaching and learning for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In line with some of the key aspects of the Second Language Acquisition and TESOL literature discussed earlier, both documents are clear about the need for teachers to 1) recognise language learners as language speakers and users with developing language repertoires, 2) be informed about bi/multilingual development and the individual learner's language background, the role of first language and its value in learning language and concept learning in that language, and 3) address language teaching and learning accordingly (**Standard 1**). Both set out teacher standards that require understanding of the structure of the English, the language demands of particular content areas and learning tasks (**Standard 2**). With respect to Professional Practice, Standards **3, 4** and **5** articulate appropriate planning, monitoring, assessment, feedback and reporting based on EAL/D learning progressions, while maintaining learning environments that are culturally and linguistically inclusive of EAL/D learners and supportive of their learning needs. The last two Standards (**6** and **7**) focus on Professional Engagement, promoting professional learning for working effectively with EAL/D learners and their families, and drawing on intercultural understandings and skills to develop respectful and reciprocal relationships that acknowledge cultural and linguistic practices. Policy and resourcing to see these documents guide teacher education, credentialing and professional learning is warranted.

In addition, across a number of jurisdictions, a number of good programs and resources have been developed. However, the potential of these can only be realised with well-designed professional learning, local program development, sustained implementation and review. Without this:

Teachers are confused because they have taught curriculum content and corrected students' work (as if for first language speakers of SAE [Standard Australian English]), but their students are not progressing as they believe they should (if they were first language speakers of SAE). Similarly, students know that they are 'trying, trying, but never quite getting it right'. (Nakata in Sellwood & Angelo 2013, p. 254)



Conclusion

This chapter has presented RES data in relation to successful teaching and posited two current documents as having important potential to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D students' learning needs; however, for this to be actualised, policy and implementation are required. As Angelo and Carter (2015, p. 130) observe, 'just as quality information about multilingualism for Indigenous students in contact language ecologies is uncommon in education contexts, so too are practical supportive strategies'. They warn that in 'this professional void, unhelpful notions can proliferate' and that while educators may be 'conscious in a general fashion of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity ... this abstract notion does not tend to operationalise into specific pedagogical responses in classrooms'. Well-designed programs, teaching, monitoring and assessment resources and practical professional learning are available; more, particularly developed for diverse learners, are needed. Improvement via teacher standards places a significant load on teachers. Support structures must be in place from education systems, in terms of languages policy, professional learning and practical teaching and learning and assessment resources for EAL/D learners in remote settings.

Current system responses to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' academic achievement focus on English literacy outcomes, rather than language-learning strengths and needs, and interventions focus narrowly on the perceived 'code-cracking' aspect of literacy. This is an unhelpful notion that obscures the learning process as students cross systems that differ in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structure, pragmatics, world knowledge and culture. Off-the-shelf phonics products attract political attention, yet literacy research points to size and depth of vocabulary knowledge for successful language learning and use and for reading comprehension ability and school success, in both first and second language learners (Carlo et al. 2004, Schoonen & Verhallen 2008), and a broader conceptualisation of language to be supported.

Digging deeper

Disbray, S. (2015). Spaces for learning: policy and practice for indigenous languages in a remote context. *Language and Education*, 1-20. doi: 10.1080/09500782.2015.1114629

Disbray, S. (2015). Indigenous Languages in Education – Policy and Practice in Australia. *UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts*, 4(1), 1-23.

C12: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR REMOTE SCHOOLS

Chapter overview

Schools in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are unique cultural interfaces. They are learning sites where local adults and adults from places that are geographically and socially dramatically different come together to teach and learn. The student cohort is overwhelmingly local, and their histories, experiences and languages are distinct from those of the non-local staff. The experience and expectations of schooling, teaching and this interface of local staff, students and families is generally profoundly different from that of the visiting staff. This has implications for the preparation, ongoing learning and practice of effective educators in these sites.

The RES project sought involvement from various stakeholders, including remote Aboriginal people, overwhelmingly from the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia, regions the project has dubbed 'red dirt' places. The topic of this chapter is developing a workforce well suited to a red dirt school. The RES research findings contribute to the understandings required for implementation of a range of strategies across Australia, designed to address workforce concerns.

Key messages

- Local educators are critical for success in remote schools.
- Professional development that provides the right mix of skills for teachers and assistants is essential for effective teaching.
- Teachers need skills to teach English as an Additional Language or Dialect.
- Learning partnerships that involve teachers working in tandem with local assistants, schools with local governance bodies, and teachers with parents are foundational for successful schools.

What does the literature say?

Mulford (2011) notes a similarity between a wealth of recent Australian and international research on teacher and school-leader quality and the more broadly recommended policy and practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, recognising the importance of:

- increased and sustained individual and collective capacity building to provide knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable school communities to create their own futures (Lambert 2005, Parding 2013, Santoro 2009)
- education practices that are culturally relevant and context-specific (Beresford & Gray 2012, Castagno & Brayboy 2008, Gower & Byrne 2012, Klenowski 2009, Luke et al. 2002, Martin 2003)
- working together through partnerships, networks and shared leadership, in schools, between schools and between schools and communities (Bourke et al. 2000, Byrne & Munns 2012, Santoro et al. 2011a).

These points are echoed in RES research. While some of the findings are not novel and many of the complexities of education delivery are not unique to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education settings, our study differs in some crucial respects. First, it is one of a small proportion that focuses on remote and very remote locations and on the views of remote Aboriginal people as well as non-local education staff (Colman-Dimon 2000, Commonwealth of Australia 1996, Kral & Falk 2004, Wearne & Yunupingu 2011).

Further, according to the Northern Territory Department of Education, over 90% of students are emergent bilinguals, that is, students who are speakers of local traditional and/or contemporary language(s), adding English to their language repertoire as they grow up (Wilson 2014). This is a mundane observation at one level, and yet its implications are surprisingly little understood or addressed in schooling, in interventions or in testing regimes (Angelo 2013b, Wigglesworth et al. 2011). While a student's language background is frequently portrayed as a 'gap', for remote Aboriginal people this is not the case; this is a challenge common to many speakers of minority languages (McCarty & Zentella 2015). Indeed, our research showed that for many remote community members, children's home language(s) were seen as integral to school learning in a number of ways: instrumentally, as a means of accessing new knowledge; in consideration of identity and wellbeing; and as a skill and valuable social resource in and of itself, bound to local cultural knowledge (Marmion et al. 2014, Minutjukur et al. 2014a, Osborne et al. 2014).

What does the RES evidence say?

Within a range of responses about effective system response (Figure 25), workforce development stands out, particularly for non-remote respondents, as being important. In summary form, Table 10 captures the array of issues raised by respondents. While it may seem unusual that so few remote respondents offered responses, the issues raised reflect the concerns of non-local teachers, people who manage systems, who are often involved in universities, departments of education or other organisations with an outsider perspective.

See what a selection of respondents said about **professional learning**, **pre-service preparation**, **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher recruitment** and **community collaboration**.

In terms of the aspects of professional learning, many of the concerns were about learning from and in the context of remote schools. It was generally not about formal training or qualifications, except where the learning was related to teaching English as an additional language or dialect. It was the kind of learning that happens when teachers learn from each other and from their local colleagues. For many teachers who commented, their concerns were about how they get the knowledge, the professional development or the skills they need for work in the context. Some were concerned about getting structures and strategies in place to ensure that culturally responsive learning was possible.

In terms of teacher preparation, the need for programs that equipped new teachers for a remote teaching position were highlighted. They talked about the need for remote practicums, and some identified the need for universities to support the preparation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. Some identified good practices, such as where some universities offer a remote learning experience as an extra for students who want to teach in remote schools.

On the topic of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher recruitment, there was general recognition of the value of local teachers and assistants because of their knowledge, their desire to stay in communities and their ability to act as role models. However, some respondents felt that they were often not well supported, and that strategies and resourcing were not in place to be able to effectively support them. There was an observation that good Aboriginal teachers were sometimes taken out of the classroom and placed into management roles.

On community collaboration, respondents spoke about the need for opportunities for parents to be more engaged at school. Some talked about the need for community buy-in or ownership of the school. The value of having community members employed at school was recognised.

FIGURE 25: WHAT WOULD AN EFFECTIVE REMOTE EDUCATION SYSTEM LOOK LIKE? (N=921)

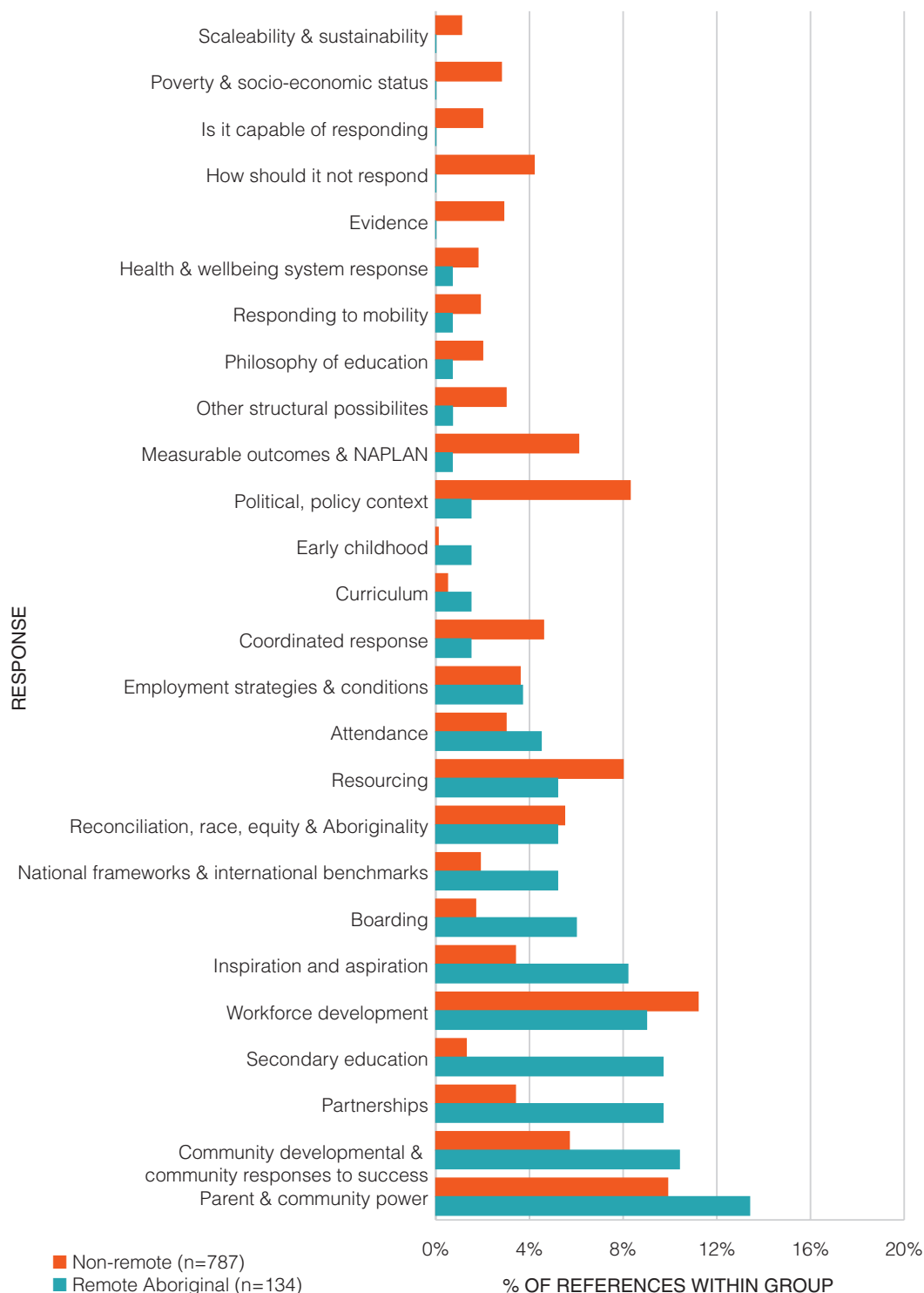


TABLE 10: THEMES EMERGING UNDER 'WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT' (N=133)

THEMES	REMOTE ABORIGINAL	NON-REMOTE	TOTAL
Professional learning and standards	1	25	26
Pre-service teacher training and preparation	1	13	14
Collaboration with community	2	11	13
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher recruitment and development	4	7	11
Recruiting the right people	4	6	10
Assistant teacher training and support	1	9	10
Managing turnover	2	7	9
Adequate resources for staffing and PD	0	9	9
Managing induction	0	8	8
Mentoring	0	5	5
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership	2	3	5
School autonomy and control	0	3	3
Housing	1	2	3
Managing stress	0	2	2
HR policies and practices	0	2	2
Empowered people	0	2	2
Coping with trauma	0	1	1
Total	18	115	133

How can we develop an appropriate remote schools workforce?

Now we relate the results discussed above to policies, practices and proposals by framing schools as sites for learning or, more precisely, for learning partnerships. Doing so goes to the core of being **contextually responsive**, as the teachers and teaching programs that fit red dirt schools are not there on the shelf, but need to be developed.

We argue that educators in remote schools will be best supported through the adoption of a shared narrative that is responsive to the needs of educators as well as of students. The Northern Territory Department of Education is targeting workforce development through the Indigenous Education Strategy (Northern Territory Department of Education 2015b). Its positioning of workforce is good, as it looks at development, not solely recruitment. A number of positive goals are set, including a commitment to developing and supporting a strong workforce, developing principals' cultural competency, providing resources for school staff on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and teaching strategies. It also supports the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and capacity through scholarships and early career programs.

A few comments on recruitment and the opportunities for pre-service as well as in-service training are warranted. We interviewed a number of participants involved with pre-service teacher placements in remote settings. Some of the non-local teachers we interviewed had themselves first visited a remote school as a pre-service teacher. When well supported by the candidate's university, the school and the department, these visits were reported to be potentially effective in pre-service training and recruitment to remote settings, particularly because they are place-based learning experiences (Lavery et al. 2014).

Further in response to pre-service teacher training, teacher standards of focus areas 1.4: 'Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' and 2.4: 'Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians', a number of universities have developed units and modules to skill teachers, in particular pre-service teachers (Anderson & Atkinson 2013, Chigeza & Whitehouse 2012, Monash University et al. 2013). Such programs are important preparation, but local, place-based learning and practice are necessary to connect theory and practice on the ground. Programs such as the Yolngu studies program offer important learning opportunities and by their nature are two-way, placing value on local knowledge. Other universities are seeing the value of such placements.

Schools as sites for learning partnerships

Returning to the topic of schools as sites for learning partnerships that recognise and work with the cultural interface that is part of remote teaching, this section discusses a number of ways that this can look.

Local orientation

Developing and delivering local orientation for new non-local staff is a worthwhile investment. It not only provides important knowledge for new staff, but its development and enactment offers a forum for validation of local cultural and language knowledge and local experience. Local educators shared their experiences, including taking walking orientation/introduction sessions in their community. Orientation sessions can be a meaningful part of relationship building and community engagement, particularly when a range of community members are involved, such as staff, families, elders and others working in the community who can act as advisers to principals and as a working committee to develop and deliver orientation and language programs.

New local staff also need orientation to the workplace procedures and routines in a particular school. Collaboration by non-local staff and local staff to develop such sessions opens potential for dialogue about their professional roles and the interface they work in. This leads to the next point, team teaching.

Learning together and team teaching

In the Northern Territory Department of Education, there is a strong history in some remote schools of team teaching (Bowman et al. 1999), with a formal program of professional learning resources and a clear method for fostering learning, planning and teaching in local/non-local teacher teams (Graham & Northern Territory Department of Education 1999). This has the potential to address one of Mulford's points above 'to increase and sustain individual and collective capacity building to provide knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable school communities to create their own futures'.

In some schools, we have also observed how the Visible Learning program has supported team teaching or provided another way to foster joint professional reflection and learning practices.

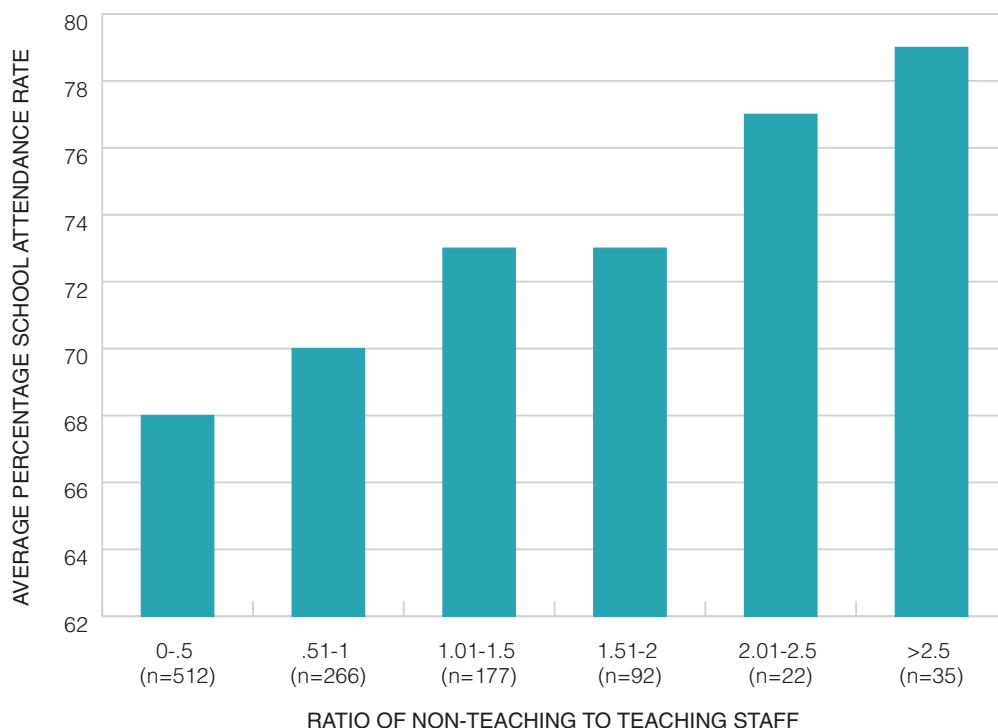
Local educators

The research has clearly identified a range of crucial roles that local educators play. The recent work of Shore and colleagues (Bat & Shore 2014; Shore et al. 2014a, 2014b) explores issues of work and training for local educators in detail. For local educators' roles as first language teachers to be realised, partnerships between local and non-local staff are key, given the importance of the school principal in setting priorities in the school and the fact that the non-local teacher generally controls the classroom timetable. Language programs also benefit from professional learning meetings with and across language groups.

Concern was raised, at times with frustration from non-local teachers, about the competing commitments that many local educators have. Some identified the need for flexible budgeting and employment arrangements, so that a pool of staff can be employed, allowing for absences while still having access to staff. A number of principals were very creative in collaborations with outside projects and funding sources to have as many local staff as possible employed in the school.

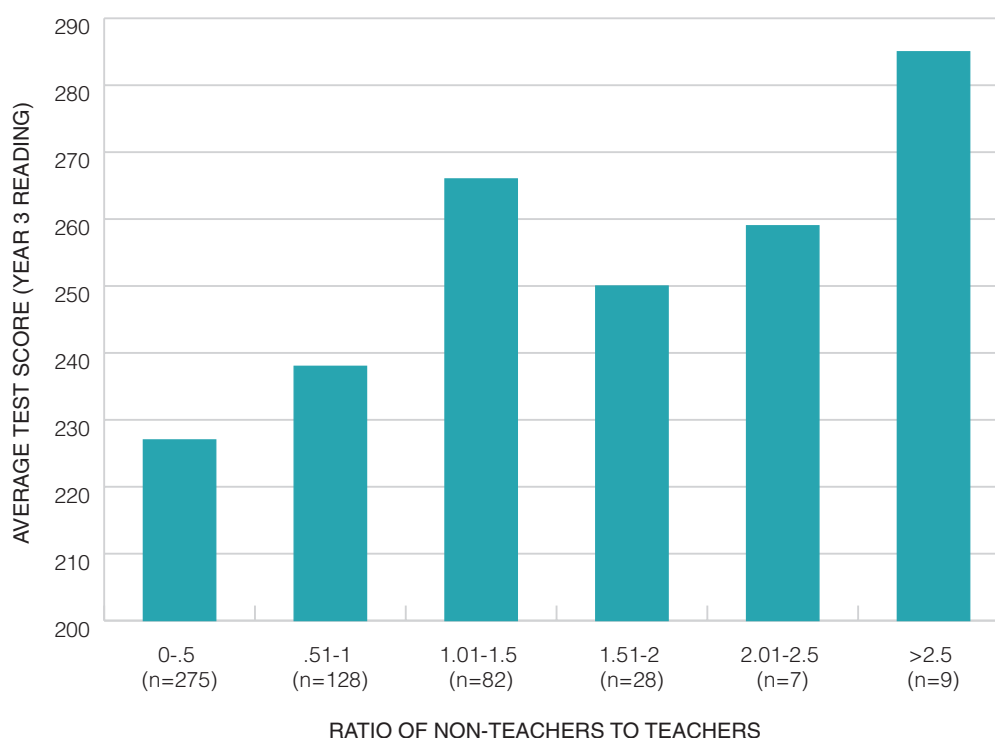
This links to a further strong theme in our research results not covered earlier: the importance of community members being actively involved with the school, providing essential links between home and school. Investment in employing local staff in a range of roles is a very positive way to achieve meaningful community engagement, with a range of spin-offs, including attendance and academic performance (see Figure 26, Figure 27 and Figure 28).

FIGURE 26: RATIO OF NON-TEACHERS TO TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ATTENDANCE, VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS WITH >80% ABORIGINAL OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, 2008–2014



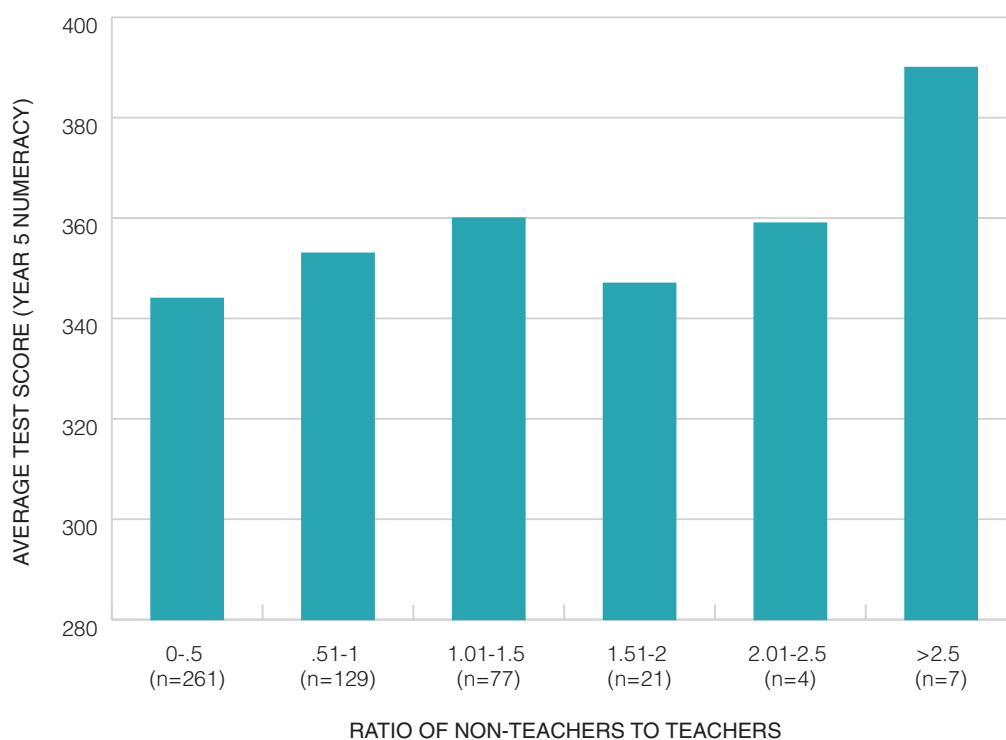
Source: ACARA (2016)

FIGURE 27: RATIO OF NON-TEACHERS TO TEACHERS AND NAPLAN YEAR 3 READING SCORES, VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS WITH >80% ABORIGINAL OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, 2008–2014



Source: ACARA (2016)

FIGURE 28: RATIO OF NON-TEACHERS TO TEACHERS AND NAPLAN YEAR 5 NUMERACY SCORES, VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS WITH >80% ABORIGINAL OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, 2008–2014



Source: ACARA (2016)

Partnerships: Who are educators?

Partnerships can increase the number of non-teacher educators, and collaborations with teachers can provide ways to develop and deliver contextualised curriculum and embed and acknowledge local knowledge, identity and history. In another paper (Osborne et al. 2014, pp. 19-21) Sam Osborne has talked about the potential to draw on the range of experts and specialist knowledge in communities, local people with language, cultural and ecological knowledge and non-local health professionals, legal advisers, anthropologists, scientists and rich learning spaces such as art centres and ranger programs, in the context of what we have called a 'Red Dirt Curriculum'.

Indeed, there are a number of innovative, locally contextualised place-based projects. In central Australia, CSIRO partners with some schools to undertake local environmental science programs called 'Caring for Country'. At Maningrida in the Northern Territory, in a collaboration between the school, the local Djelk Rangers and the Australian Venom Research Unit (part of the Department of Pharmacology at the University of Melbourne), students are taking part in developing health and ecological knowledge resources, through project-based learning-on-country activities (Webb et al. 2013). Ranger groups, often under the auspice of local land councils, are providing meaningful and productive partners for school programs, based on local arrangements (Fogarty 2013, Fogarty & Schwab 2012).

Teaching English as an additional language

Given their fundamental role in classroom instruction, success in learning and the importance of becoming literate, English language teaching and learning warrant greater attention (for further elaboration on this see Chapter 11). Classroom teachers are a key source of English language instruction, yet EAL/D qualifications are not a prerequisite to recruitment; the necessary language awareness for the local language setting, English language and the language-learning needs of EAL/D learners are simply not in their teacher tool kit (Angelo & Carter 2015). While cultural awareness may be built into the graduate teacher standards and local learning practices, language teaching requires further technical knowledge.

The newly developed Northern Territory Department of Education English as a Second Language Policy and Guidelines (Northern Territory Department of Education 2015a) are strong documents, but without professional learning and programs supportive of ESL practice—and mandating of these—student EAL/D needs are unlikely to be met. Professional learning networks here are essential.



Digging deeper

Disbray, S., & Bauer, R. (2016). A Place to Learn and Work: Yuendumu Learning Centre. *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts* [Special Issue: Synthesis & Integration] (19), 26-45. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18793/LCJ2016.19.03>

Disbray, S. (2015). *Red Dirt Teaching – developing the right workforce for remote schools*. Paper presented at the Remote Education Systems Lecture Series, Charles Darwin University, Darwin. 21 July 2015.

Guenther, J., & Disbray, S. (2015). *Why local staff matter in very remote schools*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education annual conference, Fremantle. Individual paper retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/19290693/WHY_LOCAL_STAFF_MATTER_IN_VERY_REMOTE_SCHOOLS

Guenther, J. (2015). *Conspiring to inspire community aspirations through remote education*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education annual conference, Fremantle. Symposium paper retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/21013462/Conspiring_to_inspire_community_aspirations_through_remote_education

Video links

Watch a short introduction to this topic



Watch one remote educator talk about burnout and staff relationships



Watch Lecture #4, Workforce development for remote schools



C13: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN REMOTE SCHOOLS: WHO IS ENGAGED FOR WHAT?

Chapter overview

The premise of this chapter is that successful remote schools are defined by the level of parent and community involvement in the school (Chapter 7). This indicator is more important than either attendance or academic outcomes. For non-remote respondents, the level of school–community engagement was the second most important indicator of a successful school.

While RES respondents gave plenty of examples of what this might look like in a remote school, they also suggested a number of ways that systems can respond to achieve these important outcomes (see Chapters 10, 11 and 12). The importance of parental involvement is certainly not ignored by systems, even if the dominant discourse of success is about attendance, attainment, retention and transition to further education or work.

RES respondents suggested that the best way to achieve these outcomes is by giving parents and communities power. But is this realistically achievable? This chapter argues that community engagement is important, but that the question of how to achieve powerful community–school partnerships, where parents and community role models are actively involved in children's education or at schools in other ways, is not easily answered. It is one thing for school systems to have community-engagement strategies, but it is quite another for communities to have school-engagement strategies. The chapter concludes with some suggestions for how the goals of communities and systems can be—and in some cases are being—successfully achieved.

Key messages

- Community engagement is an important process to achieve successful outcomes in remote schools.
- There are different kinds of engagement, some of which are not helpful.
- The kind of engagement that matters for communities is where there is at least mutual benefit in partnerships between communities and schools.

What does the literature say?

What is community engagement?

Before looking at 'engagement', let me indicate what we mean by 'community'. When it comes to RES findings, we refer to the broad range of stakeholders that form part of the education system in a remote community—broadly speaking, the end users of schooling: parents, students, elders, employers, non-government agencies, training providers, and higher or further education stakeholders. A lot of the literature focuses just on parents and carers. Our definition and scopes are therefore broader.

Within the context of successful systems, successful teaching and successful learning (see **Chapter 7**), community engagement can cover a range of elements and strategies. It could be about any of the following:

- community involvement in school governance and leadership (Ranson 2011)
- parent involvement in learning at school or home and educator support for learning at home, for example through home liaison officers (Borgonovi & Montt 2012, Daniel 2015, Emerson et al. 2012)
- parent/teacher relationships and communication with school, for example through newsletters (Higgins & Morley 2014)
- staff involvement in community activities
- cultural inclusiveness (Gollan & Malin 2012, Hands 2013) and responsiveness (Perso 2012)
- community or NGO involvement in school activities, for example in excursions (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2010)
- consultative bodies
- formal partnerships between schools and communities or communities and schools (What Works. The Work Program 2013)
- employer involvement in schools and student involvement in industry, such as work experience and school-based apprenticeships.

Of note in the literature is the weight given to issues related to parental involvement. However, the important thing to note here is that the structures of community engagement should not be limited to those that are initiated from the school. Some of the literature describes parents as 'targets', suggesting a kind of battle where parents are forced to engage. There is little in the literature I have seen that points to the roles of community in schools (as initiators of engagement).

The list here includes a number of structures associated with engagement. These structures range from formal partnership arrangements, to school councils, to consultative bodies and even programs such as VET in schools. However, each structure has different actions associated with engagement. Those actions might be described in terms such as consulting, networking, partnering, collaborating, coordinating, empowering or participating.

The literature differentiates between various forms or types of engagement. Barnett et al. (2010), for example, differentiate between cooperation, coordination and collaboration (see Figure 29). Cooperation occurs when actors remain autonomous and continue to work independently of each other. But as partnerships move from coordination to collaboration they tend to work more interdependently. The mutual benefit experienced in collaboration morphs into a symbiotic relationship as collaboration strengthens. While Barnett et al.'s models were applied to education partnerships more generally, they could also apply to the specific cases of school/family/community engagement. At low levels of engagement, parents and communities are targets to be engaged. When engagement levels are high, the number of actors collaborating increases, but collaborative interdependence is also evident and there is mutual benefit in the engagement.

FIGURE 29: A TYPOLOGY OF ENGAGEMENT

COOPERATION X	COORDINATION X	COLLABORATION X
Independence		Interdependence

Is community engagement important for schools?

The role that parents and communities more generally play in educating children is seldom questioned. However, Lea et al. (2011) suggest in their somewhat provocative ‘Fuzzy logic’ paper:

Parents do not demonstrate the active distrust and sense of high-stakes competition that intensive ‘cultivators’ display. Is it this trust, this ‘non-engagement’ that external commentators really mean to dismantle when they talk of needing to do more to force Indigenous parents to explicitly value education? (Lea et al. 2011a, p. 335)

While the authors do not actually argue for less community engagement, they do suggest that the drive for community engagement from schools is underpinned by a deficit discourse where the reasons for ‘poor’ attendance and ‘gaps’ in achievement are based on a ‘lack’ of engagement or valuing of education. According to them, the logic therefore goes that improving parents’ involvement in school will improve outcomes. What they found was that parents trusted schools to do their job, so why should they bother getting involved in schools when the schools were the experts? In a more recent paper based on the same data, Lea and her colleagues argued that while schools see parent engagement as an ‘inarguable good’ it tends to be focused on ‘assisting parents to reinforce the values of the school’ and not necessarily supporting the values and cultural beliefs of parents and communities (Lea et al. 2011b, p. 278). In this they could well be correct, but their study was conducted in three urban schools of the Northern Territory, and the situation is somewhat different in remote communities.

Why is parent engagement important?

There are some compelling arguments in the fuzzy logic described by Lea and her colleagues. But there are some equally compelling arguments from Australian and international research that suggest otherwise. My own research, and that of the RES project, has shown that community engagement, when done well, benefits parents as much as or more, than it does schools. And it has less to do with academic performance than it has to do with social capital. Good community engagement will lead to:

- parents having an ally in the classroom and teachers having an ally in the home
- parents benefitting from the social networks generated through engagement activities
- parents feeling a greater sense of belonging and ownership of the school
- parents having a greater say in the decision-making that goes on in the school
- parents being able to access a wider range of non-school supports in the community
- parents developing greater parenting self-efficacy

(Guenther 2011, 2014).

These findings concur with other research. There is a distinction in some of the literature between parental engagement in schooling and parental engagement in learning (Emerson et al. 2012, Hattie 2009). However, according to the Australian Government's Students First approach, the benefits are largely school-related:

Parent engagement is associated with improvements across a range of indicators, including:

- *better education outcomes*
- *enhanced engagement with school work*
- *more regular school attendance*
- *better behaviour*
- *and increased social skills.*

(Department of Education and Training 2015)

Regardless, contrary to Lea and her colleagues' findings, there is strong evidence for involving parents in children's education. The points they make though, about engagement processes that simply promote the hegemonic values of school culture, are worth noting.

What does the RES evidence say?

Recapping on what success is

In [Chapter 7](#), we showed how RES respondents viewed success in remote schools. We presented a chart that showed their responses (Figure 18). When responding to issues related to success in remote education, RES respondents described a number of indicators, which are summarised in the chart. The most frequently mentioned indicator of success was parent involvement and role models in children's education. They suggested that a successful school was one in which parents and role models were involved at school. The flip side of this is what we categorised as 'community engagement', which is schools being involved in the community. The two are related, but of note is that local people spoke about parent involvement more than non-locals, and non-locals tended to speak more about engagement than locals.

The other point to take away from the chart is the low ranking of issues such as attendance, post-school transitions and Year 12 completion. Even 'academic outcomes', which ranked second for locals, was not about NAPLAN achievement or test scores, it was more about being able to read, write and count in English. Nearly one-third of all responses in our data from remote Aboriginal stakeholders was about the dual needs of community engagement and parent involvement. So contrary to Lea et al.'s findings mentioned previously, RES respondents do believe that engagement is fundamentally integral to the success of remote education.

Recapping on appropriate system responses

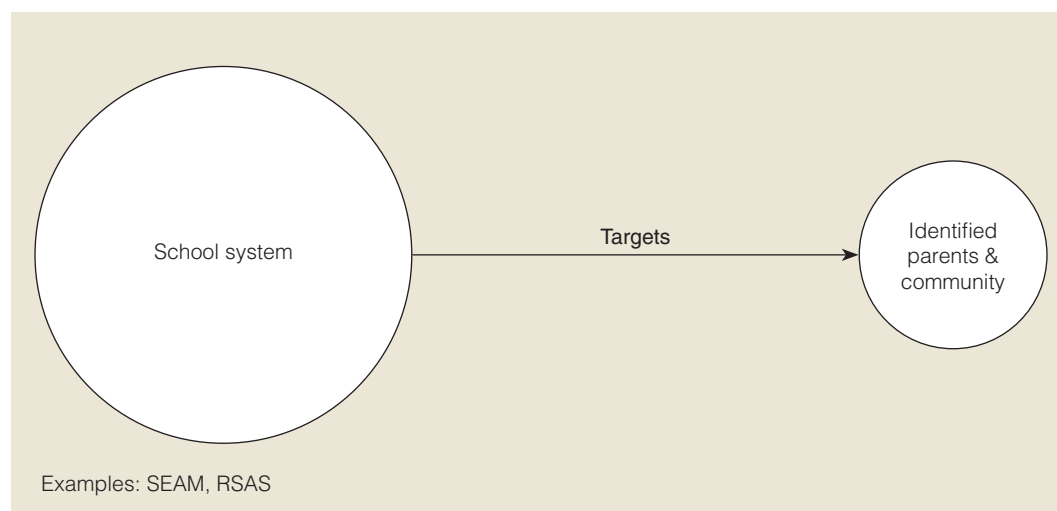
Another part of our data that supports the views expressed in Figure 18 about success are the views expressed about how systems should respond, shown in [Figure 25](#), introduced in Chapter 12. While there was some divergence here in the views of non-remote and remote Aboriginal stakeholders, if we focus on the latter group, we can see that the top responses focus on parent and community power, community development and community responses to success, and partnerships. These three categories accounted for about one-third of all remote Aboriginal responses. The message to take home from this graph is that communities are saying that they want systems to work with them to achieve educational success for remote learners.

Who is engaged for what?

We now turn to the question posed in the title of this chapter: Who is engaged and for what? We found a number of different ways that community engagement was expressed in remote schools and communities. I'll summarise these by offering three models of community engagement that arise from our findings.

Model 1: Targeted engagement

FIGURE 30: TARGETED ENGAGEMENT MODEL OF PARENTS AND COMMUNITY

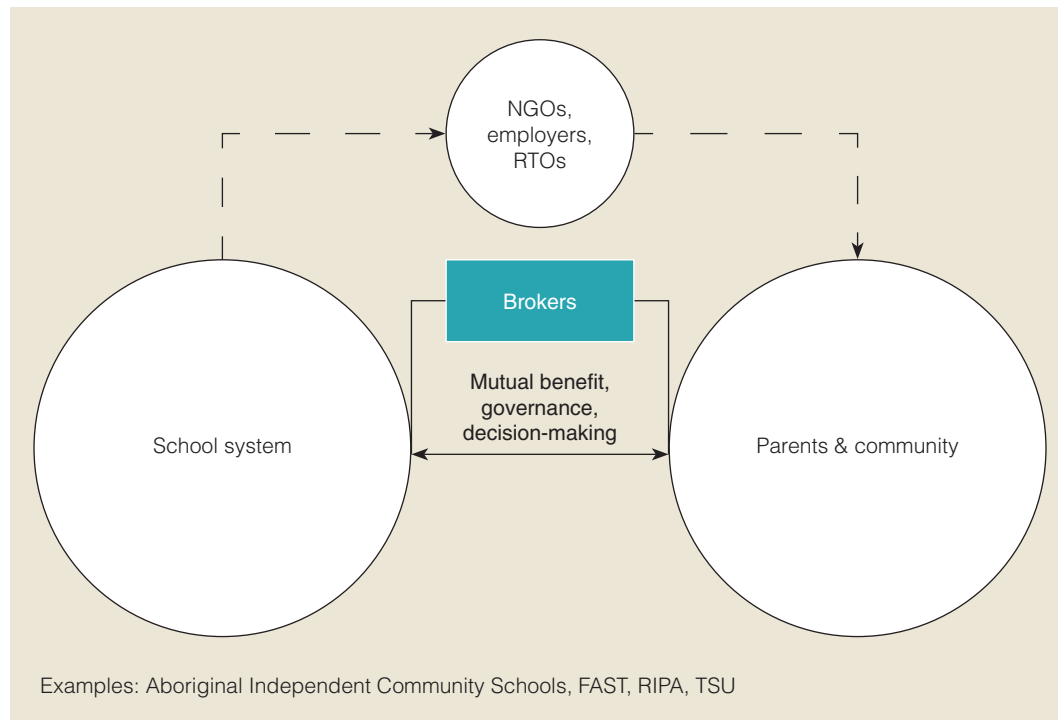


Model 1 (Figure 30) is the simplest form of engagement, of which we saw lots of examples. The language used to describe this kind of engagement is that of consultation, compliance and liaison. Examples would include the kind of engagement that occurs in programs such as the **School Enrolment and Attendance Measure** (SEAM) or the **Remote School Attendance Strategy** (at least in some of its various forms) using 'attendance officers'. The focus is on short-term compliance, perhaps with an educational outcome in mind, such as higher attendance rates or improved academic performance. In this model, education is a service that needs to be delivered, parents and students being the target of delivery. I would suggest that this form of engagement is unsustainable. Why? Because there is little local ownership of the process, and there is no or little perceived benefit on the part of the targets of engagement. As Lea and her colleagues (2011) argued, this kind of engagement simply attempts to assert the values of a hegemonic system over those of community.

red dirt

Model 2: Engagement for mutual benefit

FIGURE 31: MUTUAL BENEFIT ENGAGEMENT MODEL



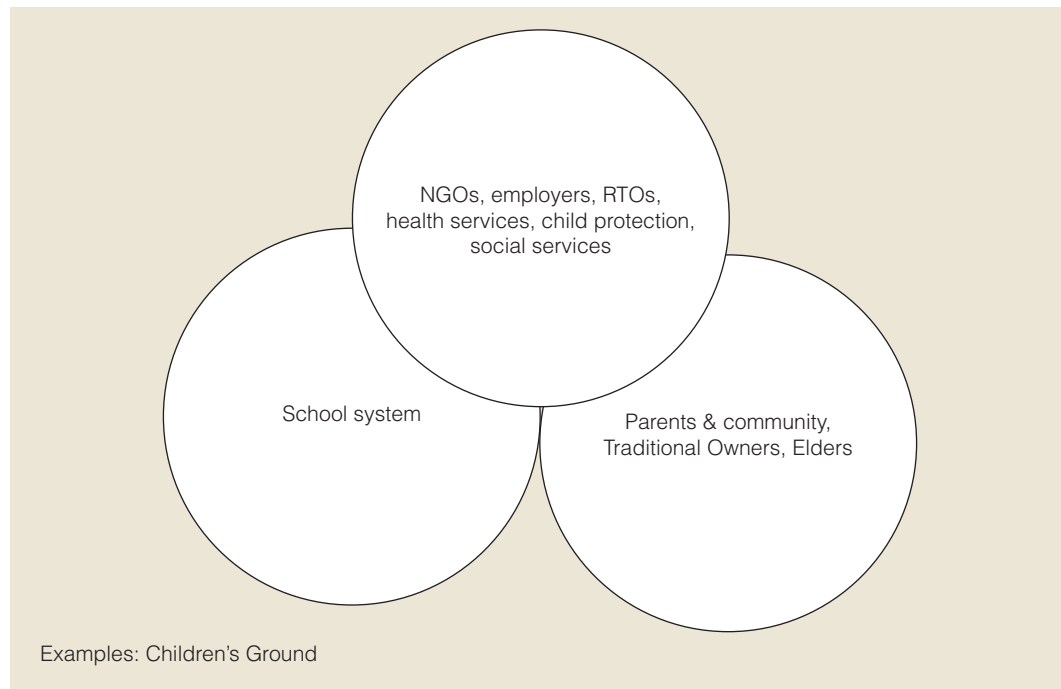
The second model (Figure 31) goes beyond short-term goals and moves towards higher levels of participation and collaborative effort between school systems and the community for mutual benefit. It includes opportunities for schools to partner with parents and communities in governance and decision-making processes. Schools in this model may also attempt to engage with system stakeholders such as NGOs, employers or training providers. The goals here are longer term, and they incorporate the philosophical standpoints of all players. We could describe this as a two-way or both-ways model of engagement. We saw a few examples of this model, particularly among independent schools where there was a strong impetus for involvement from the community itself.

We've seen a few different examples of ways that brokers can be used to facilitate engagement. Some schools use a programmatic approach (e.g. family-school partnership programs such as Families and Schools Together) to achieve similar outcomes. There are special considerations here for boarding schools, where their 'community' can be spread out across a number of locations. While some boarding schools manage this process themselves (see for example Scots College: Samengo 2013), others rely on brokers to work between communities and the school.

There are some recent innovations in this kind of role, for example the NT Department of Education's Transition Support Unit and the Remote Indigenous Parents Association, an initiative of Boarding Australia.

Model 3: Symbiotic engagement

FIGURE 32: SYMBIOTIC ENGAGEMENT MODEL



Model 3 (Figure 32), described here as 'symbiotic engagement', is far more integrated. It sees education more holistically belonging within a larger system where the array of stakeholders work constructively together in deep, long-term collaborative effort. It is no longer a partnership, although it may seek support from outside to further its shared goals. It is highly participative. There are very few examples of this model that we have observed. One that stands out is the approach of Children's Ground (Children's Ground 2013), based in Jabiru. The end goal is not just about education, but includes employment, cultural and health and wellbeing outcomes (Children's Ground 2015).

These models are imperfect generalised abstractions and do not explain the many quite different approaches that schools and communities take to engage families and communities. We are not suggesting here that there is one right or wrong approach to take. However, if we are to take seriously the views of remote community members, then we will look for ways of taking community engagement beyond Model 1 towards Model 2 at least.



How do we do this kind of engagement?

Based on our observations, there are several ways this can happen. Again, there is no magic formula here, but we have observed that the following actions will yield mutually beneficial outcomes.

Listen to community members

This sounds pretty obvious, but it does not always happen. But it need not be that hard. This can be achieved directly by the school working with the community, or through a broker, who brings together the relevant stakeholders in the community. It is in part about having 'power sensitive' conversations, noted in [Chapter 5](#).

Local involvement in governance and decision-making

School councils or boards need to be in place so that at a minimum there is representation from parents and the broader community in the management and leadership of the school. This presents a significant challenge for boarding schools, but having remote community voices on boards or councils should be a priority if community involvement is considered important.

Employ local people at the school

An important way of empowering the community is to [employ local people in the local school](#). This doesn't have to be as teachers or as assistants. It could be the receptionist, bus driver or gardener. Our data suggests that having higher ratios of non-locals to locals can lift attendance by as much as 10% and can improve academic outcomes as well. Again, for boarding schools this may present challenges, but I would argue that having at least some staff (e.g. boarding house, or classroom assistants) drawn from remote communities would be wise if community involvement is considered important.

Engage with all the system stakeholders

To get the maximum benefit from schooling in a [complex environment](#), schools need to work at their relationships, not just with parents, but with employers, service providers and training providers, cultural leaders and elders. There is a lot of hard work in building relationships. But trust (which is an important component of collaboration) is essential and cannot be built outside of relationships.

Measure community participation as an outcome

If, as our data suggests, family and community involvement is success, then schools should be measuring this as an outcome. It becomes part of an accountability framework just like any other performance indicator. Here are some ways that community participation could be measured, particularly with quantitative measures in mind ([see Chapter 7 for more detail](#)).

- Is there a school council with community representation?
- Does the school have parent-teacher days/events? How many attend?
- Is there a school policy that actively pursues employment of local educators? How many have been employed as a result?
- Do parents meet with teachers? What proportion of parents have contact?
- Are community members involved in extra-curricular activities?
- Are community members employed at the school?
- What practices are in place in the school to build relationships between local and non-local staff?
- Do parents or community members help with reading to children?

- Is there local adaptation of curriculum?
- Are community members involved in recruitment of new staff?
- Are teachers competent with local languages?
- Do teachers and non-local staff engage with organisations outside of school?

Digging deeper

Guenther, J. (2014). *Families and Schools Together (FAST) at Gillen Primary School: The sustained impact of a family-strengthening process*. Working Paper Series. Research Report CR002, CRC-REP, Alice Springs. Retrieved October 2014 from http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/CR002_FASTatGillenPrimarySchool.pdf

Guenther, J. (2015). *How can academia contribute to participatory methodologies for community engagement in the diverse cultural contexts of remote Australia?* Paper presented at the Australasian Evaluation Society NT Seminar Series, Darwin. 20 February 2015. Retrieved from http://www.covaluator.net/docs/S1.4_academia_participatory_evaluations.pdf

Guenther, J., & Galbraith, M. (2014). Learning from evaluations of school-family strengthening programs: Lessons for all. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 14(2), 42.

Guenther, J., & McRae-Williams, E. (2015). *The training and employment challenge of remote communities: Is collaboration the solution?* Paper presented at the AVETRA 18th Annual Conference, Melbourne. 10 April 2015. Retrieved from <http://avetra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/50.docx>

Guenther, J., McRae-Williams, E., & Kilgariff, C. (2014). *Engineering Employment Pathways in Remote Communities and the (false) hope of Collaborative Service Provision*. Paper presented at the NARU Public Seminar Series, Darwin. 19 November 2014. Retrieved from http://naru.anu.edu.au/_documents/seminars/2014/john_guenther_collaboration_paper.pdf

McRae-Williams, E., Guenther, J., Jacobson, D., & Lovell, J. (2016). What are the enablers of economic participation in remote and very remote Australia, and how can we identify them? *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts [Special Issue: Synthesis & Integration]* (19), 6-25. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18793/LCJ2016.19.02>

Multimedia

Watch a short introduction to this topic



Watch one remote educator discuss engagement



Watch a talking PowerPoint of Lecture #10, Community Engagement: who is engaged and what for?



S5.

Future considerations

We now turn our attention to the future of remote education.
Two topics are tackled:

C14: Boarding schools and their impact

C15: Resourcing remote schools



C14: BOARDING SCHOOLS AND THEIR IMPACT

Chapter overview

Boarding schools are among the many solutions proposed to improve outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. There are many vocal proponents of this solution who argue that the opportunities for a quality education do not exist in remote communities. The Northern Territory's Indigenous Education Strategy, built on a Review of Indigenous Education, explicitly articulates a strategy that shifts the emphasis away from secondary provision in remote communities to secondary provision in boarding schools. But questions remain about the evidence on which these major strategic directions are based. This chapter raises questions about the evidence for boarding (or its lack), and it critically discusses the potential impacts for students, communities and families.

Key messages

- There is little evidence on which to base boarding school strategies and policies.
- The impacts of boarding on students and communities are not understood.
- It is not known how many students attend boarding schools/facilities or for how long.
- More research needs to be carried out before promoting boarding as a solution for remote secondary students.

What does the literature say?

We begin with an examination of the Australian and international literature as it relates to Indigenous peoples. We consider this from the perspective of policies and philosophies that underpinned the development of boarding (or residential) schools. History is important. As Mander (2012, p. 16), in his study of Western Australian boarding school experiences notes, 'Experiences such as colonisation, massacres, genocide, the forcible removal of children from families, social and cultural marginalisation, and racism have all made a contribution to the construction of the contemporary context of Indigenous Education'. Attempts to divorce the present and future from the past inevitably deny the realities of those who experienced or face the consequences of those histories.

red dirt

Assimilation

It is widely recognised among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that the historical purpose of boarding schools was to assimilate their peoples into the dominant society of which they lived (Evans-Campbell et al. 2012, Robbins et al. 2006, Smith 2009, Woods 2013). In Australia, at the 1961 conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers, Minister of State for Territories, Paul Hasluck MP wrote:

The policy of assimilation means in the view of all Australian governments that all aborigines and part-aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians. (Hasluck 1961, p. 1)

Central to assimilation policies was the practice of removing Indigenous children from their families and placing them in institutions where they were to have mainstream thinking and living instilled into their worldviews. Policies related to boarding schools and transracial adoption of Indigenous children between the 1860s and 1980s demonstrate the similarities of the outcomes of these programs on the children themselves, their families and their cultures (Ellinghaus 2006, Engel et al. 2012). A large amount of academic literature focuses on boarding and residential schools in Canada and the United States of America (USA), with policies from Australia, New Zealand and a number of other colonised societies discussed to a lesser extent. Stories from all of these societies are hauntingly analogous; however, naturally there are differences in the histories and trajectories of specific policies for each nation (Ellinghaus 2006). The boarding school policies in New Zealand are comparatively less relevant to this particular discussion; therefore, the focus will remain on Canadian, North American and Australian policies.

The reason that boarding and residential schools were so highly valued was the combination of education with the physical separation from family, culture and language, which would supposedly then eradicate the 'native ways'. The purposes for separate Indigenous education were derived from an array of belief systems, some of which are inextricably bound up in Christianisation (Boarding Schools Healing Project 2008, Partida undated, Smith 2009), paternalistic protectionism and absorption (Mander 2012, Trafzer et al. 2006) and civilisation (Champagne & Abu-Saad 2006, Stout 2012), with elements of Social Darwinism (Jester 2002, Walton 1993) and eugenics (Trafzer et al. 2006) driving its development.

Separation

The European missionaries concluded that the sooner they could separate the children from their homes and families, the sooner they could prepare the children to live a civilised life (Miller 1996). The institutions were often hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles away from students' homes or reservations (Evans-Campbell et al. 2012). If students did happen to be placed in the same institution as their brothers or sisters, communication was often prohibited (Robertson 2006). Some differences did exist between Native American and Australian policies of separation; for example, some Native American children were allowed to return to their communities after their education, whereas this was deliberately prohibited for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Neegan 2005).

Language

One of the earliest goals of the boarding school system was to eradicate Native American languages, with many children losing or involuntarily suspending their ability to speak their native languages and thus their ability to fit in upon return to their villages or reservations (Hoerig 2002). In the boarding schools, students were forbidden to engage in cultural practices or to speak their languages and suffered harsh punishment if they disobeyed (Evans-Campbell et al. 2012, Neegan 2005). Canadian residential schools also encouraged or forced children to abandon and denigrate their Aboriginal languages, with policy stipulating that they were to be taught only in English or French (Barnes et al. 2006). Prohibition from speaking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages was also implemented throughout Australian institutions under assimilation and child-removal policies (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families 1997). The long-term outcome of these policies is still evident today, with the large decline and demise of many individual native languages (Neegan 2005).

Education

Boarding schools were often rationalised as providing a means for Indigenous peoples to achieve status in the dominant society. Some American Indian parents were convinced by reformers or 'acculturated' Indians of the benefits of schooling, and in fact chose to send their children away (Ellinghaus 2006). However, the focus on industrial boarding schools in many areas, which focused on training in domestic work or manual labour, signified that Indigenous children were often not given the educational skills necessary to assimilate into higher echelons of the larger society (Smith 2009). Vocational training, with boys being taught to be labourers and girls to be domestics, was also favoured over academic education in Native American residential schools (Ellinghaus 2006, Hoerig 2002). It can be argued that economic interests were the driving force leading to the creation and design of education for Indigenous children around the world, and that the intention of each country was to prepare native children to serve as a labour force for the white community (Engel et al. 2012).

Religion

Boarding schools were frequently administered in cooperation with Christian missions with the expressed purpose of Christianising Indigenous peoples (Smith 2009). As previously outlined, the Canadian government boarding schools in particular collaborated with and were operated by several Christian churches that had long been involved in missionary work among Aboriginal people in North America (Engel et al. 2012, Woods 2013). Government policy mandated that Aboriginal children be taught Christian religious practices, implemented in a way that was intended to eradicate Aboriginal religious practices and culture (Barnes et al. 2006). The Australian Government also collaborated with Christian missionaries to socialise children to European work habits in preparation for working for the colonists, and Christianity was introduced into all American Indian schools with no attention given to native cultural traditions (Engel et al. 2012). In essence, churches attempted to use their position to eliminate the influence of Aboriginal families, communities and cultures on the children's minds, further re-engineering their worldviews and beliefs (Ellinghaus 2006).

Practice and its basis in policy

Many of the reports about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia consider the pragmatic imperatives of boarding school without any acknowledgement of the underpinning philosophical or sociological assumptions that drive a need for boarding. A good example of this is the Northern Territory's Review of Indigenous Education (Wilson 2014), which points to the apparent lack of alternatives:

The only way to meet the needs of a small and thinly distributed student population for a substantial secondary education including a breadth of options in the senior years is to aggregate students into larger groups. (p. 143)

Wilson, in his assessment, while pointing to the pragmatics of remote education delivery, also argues from an equity perspective, implying a human rights agenda at play in the provision of boarding:

It makes little sense to continue the unequal struggle to provide the full range of secondary education in the majority of remote schools with tiny numbers of attending secondary students. (p. 143)

Beyond the Northern Territory, a number of policy instruments have been pursued to create opportunities and improve outcomes for remote students, some at a national level and others more regionally targeted. For example, the Commonwealth's support of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) for \$32 million explicitly demonstrates a commitment to boarding (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation 2015a). A further \$11.6 million has been committed over three years to 2016 for the Indigenous Boarding Initiative (Pyne 2015). The Australian Government's commitment to Aboriginal Hostels, ABSTUDY, the Indigenous Youth Mobility Programme, the Indigenous Youth Leadership Programme and other targeted programs such as AFL House in Cairns are further evidence of its commitment to boarding opportunities for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Other programs are supported by state and territory governments. For example, in the Northern Territory, following on from the Wilson Review, the Indigenous Education Strategy (Northern Territory Department of Education 2015b) provides explicit support for boarding through the establishment of a Transition Support Unit and with the establishment of a boarding facility at Nhulunbuy. Put together, these are significant investments and provide considerable financial resources to put policy into practice.

However, as the subsequent sections demonstrate, not only are these (and other initiatives) built on a shallow evidence base, they are only tacitly underpinned by theoretical assumptions. It is then perhaps timely that the Australian Government has initiated an '[Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students](#)', which to date has attracted over 60 submissions, the majority including references to boarding arrangements.

Human capital imperatives

Hodges et al. (2013) undertook a review of the available information on Australian boarding schools, finding that research documenting the boarding school experience is scarce and often exists as part of more general research into private school education. Despite this, they found that around 20,000 adolescents, from a diverse range of backgrounds and countries, are attending boarding schools across Australia. Although this review did not focus or touch on the underlying philosophies of boarding schools, or focus specifically on the context and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, it did summarise some of the main reasons for the uptake of boarding school education in Australia. Currently boarders from cities and from regional and remote areas have many reasons for boarding. These include:

- parents being employed interstate or overseas
- boarding on a weekly basis to cope with sporting or academic commitments
- access to high-quality education
- increased opportunities and options offered by boarding (e.g. specialised courses, sports, extra-curricular)
- family disruption/lack of stability in home environment.

Improving family and community stability is a key goal of the Cape York Institute's program of welfare reform and social capital building. This latter goal is pursued through a range of programs to foster individual responsibility, in terms of family management and income management (Performance and Evaluation Branch 2013). Improved access, uptake and achievement in education is a further cornerstone of the program and, within this, the promotion of secondary education through boarding programs. 'Boarding school is expected to enable children to be "bi-cultural", so they are competent not only within their own community but also in the mainstream world beyond' (Performance and Evaluation Branch 2013, p. 31), with the broader goal of economic participation, leading to and enabling employment opportunities, private home ownership and employment mobility.

In broad terms, the above discussion describes the need for boarding to build a human capital base for students. In contemporary discourse, social capital and economic capital are also underpinning motives.

Boarding schools and social capital benefits

The only recent scholarly analysis of the overriding philosophies or theory behind boarding schools for disadvantaged or lower socio-economic status groups is that of Bass (2014). She explores boarding schools through Bourdieu's model of capital: education capital, social capital and cultural capital. She explores how the boarding school environment promotes social capital through stronger social ties with peers and less intimidation while dealing with adults. However, it is noted that social capital gained in school often means social capital loss at home due to less interaction with family and neighbours (Bass 2014). This is a serious implication in the context of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who board, spending large amounts of time away from their highly valued community and family ties. Some families in the remote Australian context also raise this concern, that young people will lose their sense of belonging in their home community.

Bass (2014) also believes that cultural capital is gained through boarding schools' provision of a variety of cultural activities to all students, which are often a requirement. Furthermore, students have mandatory, supervised study time in the evenings, with help available to them if needed (Bass 2014). It is perhaps these discourses of the social and cultural capital that education can provide which are most present in media reporting. In the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this education, and with it the social and cultural capital that enables access to society and economic opportunity, is only available through attendance at metropolitan boarding schools. As we have seen above in the position of the Cape York Welfare Reform program, one of the underpinning assumptions about the value of boarding is that it will enable students to better engage in the broader economy than they would be able to if they were to remain within their communities. Certainly, this resonates with recent media reporting, in which arguments drawing on notions of social and economic capital are implicit or explicit.

What does the RES evidence say?

In data-gathering Thinking Outside The Tanks Sessions (TOTTS), the RES project deliberately explored the topic of boarding. Table 11 summarises the results from these TOTTS and others where issues were raised.

The themes that we coded should not be seen necessarily as factors supporting or inhibiting boarding success. In some cases, they are a simple statement of observation and personal experience. In other cases, the themes are statements of concern or hope. As such these themes do not tell us where the problems are or how to fix them, because we did not ask those questions. Rather, we allowed people to express themselves as they wanted. However, these themes do point to some of the key issues on our respondents' minds.

The largest clusters of responses are perhaps not surprising. Boarding school is firstly seen as a transition space between community, school and a career. However, respondents were also careful to say that the required processes for these transitions are important—that students are offered appropriate support as they enter into boarding and appropriate support as they emerge from that experience. The second major cluster of responses were about the importance of the residential experience being supported in terms of relationships, structures and environments which give young people a positive experience. The third important point raised related to the significance of family influence and support for young people going to boarding. Other larger responses reflect to a large extent what we already know about boarding—that it works for some people and not for others, that communication with parents is important, that loss of language and culture may be of concern, and that there are potential negative impacts of boarding on students and on communities.

What is perhaps more interesting than the large clusters are the small or largely unstated issues related to boarding. For example, in the data only a handful of responses talked about the skewed media presentation of boarding as an issue; very few talked about resourcing; very few asked whether the 'opportunity' (offered as a theme 15 times) is realised; and few discussed the important issue of community representation in boarding school governance. These issues are important, largely because they reflect what we do not know about boarding for very remote students.

As a consequence, we decided to hold a workshop (after this data collection) with a group of remote boarding stakeholders. The workshop raised a number of critical questions about boarding, which remain to be answered. They include:

- What are the actual retention rates for remote students going to boarding schools?
- Who collects or holds the data that will provide this information?
- Where are the evaluations of the many targeted boarding programs that currently exist in Australia?
- What is the level of need or demand for boarding from remote communities?
- What happens to students on completion of their boarding experience? Do they return to communities or move elsewhere?
- On what basis do boarding schools select students?



TABLE 11: THEMES EMERGING ON THE TOPIC OF BOARDING

THEME	DESCRIPTORS	REMOTE ABORIGINAL	NON-REMOTE	TOTAL
Pathways and transition processes	To university, career, job, from community, issues of transitions into and out of boarding	9	28	37
Relationships, support and real-world learning	Informal interactions outside school, building relationships, support structures, boarding environment, pastoral care	8	24	32
Family influence	Community mentors and families as drivers for young people	4	25	29
Connection to place	Local staff, relationships between boarding schools and communities, local language and culture	0	22	22
Parents informed and involved	Choice, communication, exclusion	1	19	20
Child safety, health, wellbeing	As a motivation to send kids away, DV context, development issues, kids not coping at boarding	6	12	18
Student retention	Multiple boarding experiences, students dropping out after coming home	6	11	17
Boarding as opportunity	Chance to learn and benefit from the experience	6	9	15
Building aspiration	Increased self-belief, higher expectations, identity	2	11	13
Potential negative impacts of boarding	Wellbeing impacts, particularly on return to community, loss of role models, brain drain	2	10	12
Differential results	Works for some, not for others	1	10	11
Language and culture maintenance	Concerns about language loss, opportunities to maintain culture	4	5	9
Financial support for families	Need for ABSTUDY arrangements to be taken care of	2	6	8
Alternative models	Different models of boarding explored	0	7	7
History and trends	Personal accounts of experiences	3	3	6
Resourcing	Funding of boarding as a concern	0	6	6
Staff and skills	Getting the right staff, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff	0	6	6
False promises and myths	A lot of promise, but does it deliver benefit?	0	4	4
Improved system response	Need for a more focused system response to include local solutions	0	4	4
Exchange relationships	Between boarding schools and communities	2	1	3
Governance	Representing communities in boarding governance	1	2	3
Media focus	Skewed depiction of media on boarding	0	2	2
Totals		57	227	284

Where to from here?

Given the investment, the need for more targeted research and independent evaluation is paramount. There are significant risks if this research is not undertaken. Firstly, as we have alluded to in the literature, the failures of assimilation and religious agendas may well be repeated under the tacit banner of human capital. Secondly, without further research related to supply and demand, the funding which is currently directed at numerous initiatives risks being a scattergun approach without clear direction or expectations of outcomes. In offering this critique, we are not suggesting that boarding is not a good thing – the bulk of the RES evidence shown above suggests that people believe it is – rather, that critical research on this issue may well shed light on the many unknowns of remote boarding.

Digging deeper

Benveniste, T., Dawson, D., & Rainbird, S. (2015). The Role of the Residence: Exploring the Goals of an Aboriginal Residential Program in Contributing to the Education and Development of Remote Students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, FirstView, 1-10. doi:10.1017/jie.2015.19

Benveniste, T., Disbray, S., & Guenther, J. (2014). *A brief review of literature on boarding school education for indigenous students and recent Australian media coverage of the issue*, September 2014, CRC-REP. Retrieved May 2016 from https://www.academia.edu/8776088/A_brief_review_of_literature_on_boarding_school_education_for_indigenous_students_and_recent_Australian_media_coverage_of_the_issue

Benveniste, T., Guenther, J., Dawson, D., & Rainbird, S. (2014). *Out of sight, out of mind? Bringing Indigenous parent–boarding school communication to light*. Paper presented at the 2014 AARE-NZARE Conference: Speaking back through research, Kelvin Grove, Queensland. http://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2014//data/2014_Conference/Full_papers/BENVENISTE_14.pdf

Benveniste, T., Guenther, J., Dawson, D., & Rainbird, S. (2015). *Deciphering distance: exploring how Indigenous boarding schools facilitate and maintain relationships with remote families and communities*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education annual conference, Fremantle.

Mander, D. J. (2015). Enabling Voice: Aboriginal Parents, Experiences and Perceptions of Sending a Child to Boarding School in Western Australia. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 44(Special Issue 02), 173-183. doi:10.1017/jie.2015.21

Stewart, R. (2015). Australian Indigenous Education Foundation Compendium of Best Practice for Achieving Successful Outcomes with Indigenous Students in Australian Boarding Schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 44(Special Issue 02), 207-209. doi:10.1017/jie.2015.22

Video links

Watch a short video that introduces this topic



C15: RESOURCING REMOTE SCHOOLS

Chapter overview

The question of remote school resourcing comes up over and over again in the media. Many question why it is that with all the resources applied to remote schools, they achieve the ‘worst’ results of all schools in Australia. The rationale for additional remote school funding is partly built on the basis of equity. This has translated into numerous strategies over recent years designed to close gaps and overcome disadvantage. To a large extent those strategies have failed to make a difference. But the question we ask here is ‘can better resourcing be used to inspire young people in very remote schools?’

The chapter presents evidence from an analysis of very remote school data, which shows that schools with more resources perform better in terms of attendance rates and in terms of academic outcomes.

Key messages

- Resourcing can make a difference for attendance and educational outcomes.
- One important reason resourcing makes a difference is that it enables employment of local staff.

What does the literature say?

The question about whether money matters for academic performance of schools has long been argued. The debates have gone on for decades now with some arguing that money does not matter much (Hanushek 1997, 2002, 2006; Hattie 2003; Melbourne Graduate School of Education et al. 2011; Quiggin 1999), some arguing that it matters up to a point (OECD 2012) and others arguing emphatically that money does matter (Baker 2016, Finn & Achilles 1999, Gibbons & McNally 2013, Hedges et al. 1994). Most studies would argue that it is not just the amount of money that makes a difference but how it is spent that contributes to better outcomes.

All the studies we have cited here are based on quantitative evidence with statistics to back up the findings. Resourcing of schools for academic outcomes is, however, just one part of a multifaceted issue that in Australia has dominated political debate for some time, but to a large extent the focus has been on what has been labelled the Gonski Report (Gonski et al. 2011). To some extent, the *Review of Funding for Schooling* report shifted attention away from resourcing for outcomes towards resourcing for equity (albeit with an assumption that equitable funding should produce better outcomes for those with the greatest needs), with structures designed to assign resources on the basis of need. It should be noted that the argument for ‘fairer’ distribution of education resources has also been ongoing (Field et al. 2007). This view was to a large extent re-affirmed by the Senate Select Committee on School Funding’s (2014) report, *Equity and excellence in Australian schools*.

If equity is important—and strategic educational policy documents suggest it is (for example Ministerial Council on Education 2008)—just where should funding be directed? One could argue that the whole ‘closing the gap’ agenda (Council of Australian Governments 2009a, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2009, Northern Territory

Government 2007), which has dominated policy directions for nearly a decade now, is a matter of equity. One could argue that many of the initiatives that followed on from the 2008 Melbourne Declaration (which was designed to 'promote equity and excellence') such as many of the now completed National Partnerships (Council of Australian Governments 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009b), the Measurement Frameworks (ACARA 2012a, 2015), The *Australian Education Act 2013* and other instruments such as the Australian Curriculum and Australian Professional Standards all resource or foster equity in one way or another (see Figure 20 for a summary). But how effective have they been in achieving equitable outcomes?

Another basis for adequate resourcing comes from human rights imperatives (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2000a, 2000b). Battiste (2000), speaking from a Canadian position, argues for the adequacy of funding 'to create an educational system that will create Aboriginal consciousness through the development of Aboriginal language, culture and identity' (p. 204). Christie, writing from an African perspective argues that:

Funding allocations, conditions of work of teachers, curriculum content and other significant features are crucial in determining what the right to education might mean in practice – and policies for these are enacted at national level, often out of the reach of international declarations. (Christie 2010, p. 7)

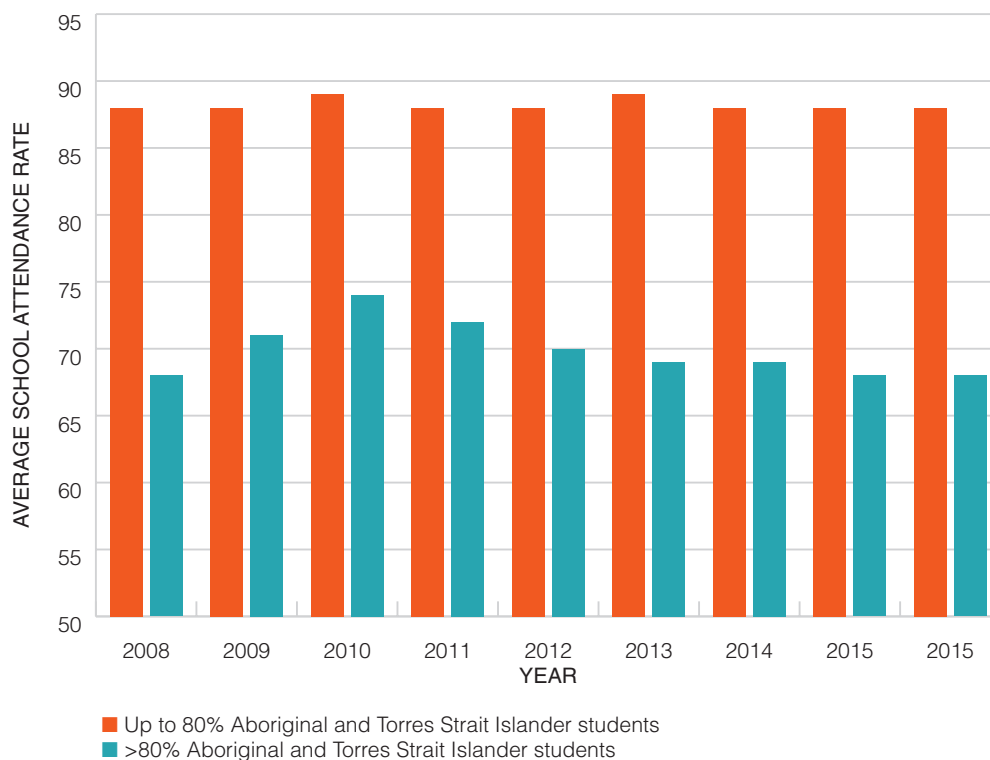
The academic debate on schooling in Australia has not focused at all on human rights in remote schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Rather, the justification for resourcing has switched to an argument for equity, as discussed in relation to Gonski, above.

What does the RES evidence say?

While not all these initiatives are directly targeted at remote Aboriginal at Torres Strait Islander schools or students, the overall intent is to improve education outcomes. Some are directly designed to address 'disadvantage' and 'close gaps'. If attendance trends are any indication, as shown in Figure 33, then collectively they have not worked particularly well. Some strategies have been designed to target particularly 'poor performing' schools where school attendance and academic performance is low. One of these more recent initiatives is the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS). Even this approach, as Figure 34 shows, has done nothing to lift attendance above the eight-year average for all RSAS schools.

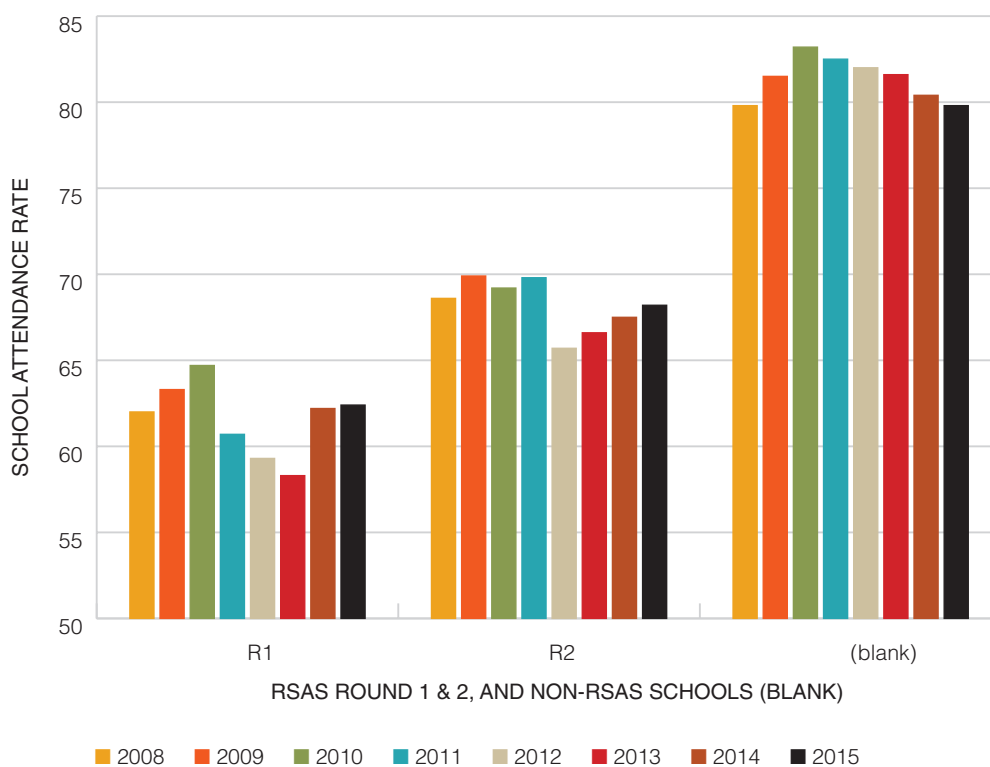


FIGURE 33: AVERAGE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES FOR VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS, 2008–2015



Source: ACARA (2016)

FIGURE 34: SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES AT VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS WITH MORE THAN 80% ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS (2008–2015), COMPARING REMOTE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE STRATEGY (RSAS) SCHOOLS (ROUND 1 AND 2) WITH OTHERS



Source: ACARA (2016)

The best that could be said for the program is that it has 'closed the gap' between RSAS and non-RSAS schools, but this is largely because attendance rates at non-RSAS schools (the third set of bars) have declined significantly from the eight-year average, from 70.2% to 68.7%. For Round 1 RSAS schools, the attendance gap with non-RSAS schools in 2012 was 17%. In 2015, this had declined to 8.9 per cent.

Regardless, none of the data presented suggests that students in these schools are particularly inspired to aspire to what schools have to offer. For all the money spent, if the best we can say is that we have stemmed the tide of declining attendance, then we as a nation, have done poorly. So what would it take to inspire students to engage in what is on offer, along with the apparent benefits of an education?

The answer to this question in part lies in the answer to the question 'what is education for?' which we discussed in [Chapter 6](#). If education is designed to meet the contextual aspirations of young people, then we could expect that young people would engage. The answer lies also in the perceptions of remote community respondents that a successful education is one where parents and community members are actively involved in school, which we discussed in [Chapter 7](#). If communities were more involved in educational decisions, we could expect to see greater investment from students. It also lies in part in responses to issues of workforce development, which we discussed in [Chapter 12](#). There we showed that attendance increases when more local people are employed at school.

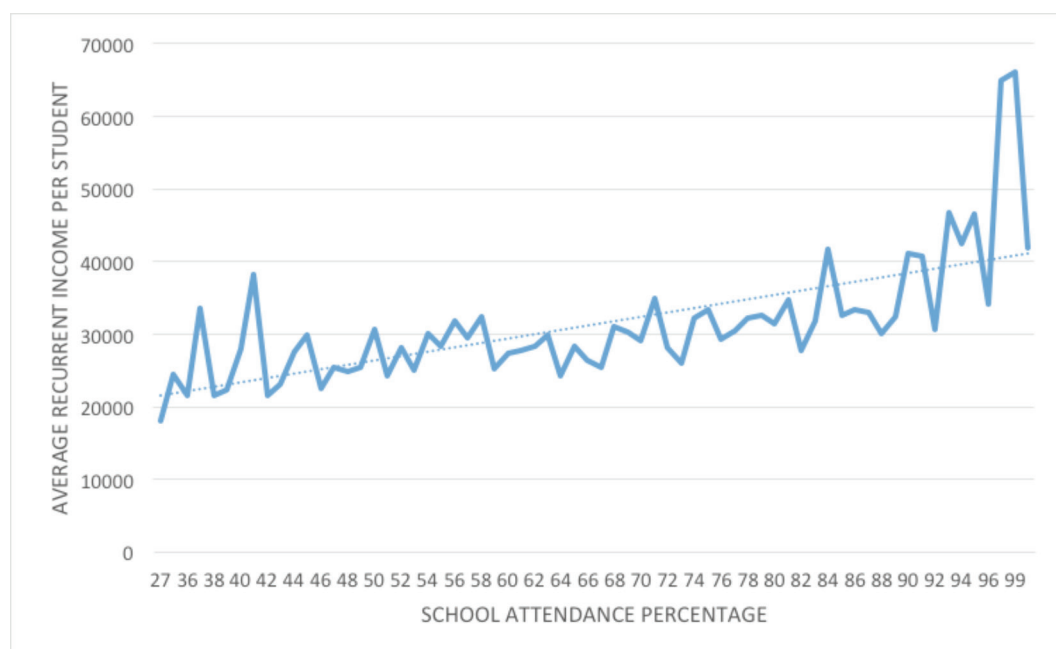
Achieving this last point must demand additional resources, hence the chart shown at Figure 35. Schools with recurrent funding per student of between \$20,000 and \$30,000 on average have attendance rates of about 50%. Schools with recurrent funding in the range of \$30,000 to \$40,000 on average have attendance rates of about 80%. Again, while we cannot be certain of a causal link between school finances and attendance, a logical reason for a relationship like this flows from the ability of schools with more resources to direct funds to [building local staff capacity](#), either in terms of numbers or through professional development. Further, while we would caution making the direct connection between attendance and aspiration or even inspiration, attendance is certainly one indication of student engagement (ACARA 2012a).

The point is, in response to the question posed in the Overview, resourcing can make a difference to inspire young people to engage in schooling. The reason this approach works and other system-wide approaches (such as National Partnerships) do not, is simply that the resources are directed where they matter, to build local community capacity and to support local involvement in the school, which as we showed in [Chapter 7](#), is what people see as educational success.

With this in mind, the rationale for better school resourcing in remote schools is not based primarily on the need for better outcomes, even though as we have shown, better outcomes tend to come when more resources are applied at the school level, on a per-student basis. Nor is the rationale based entirely on equity concerns, although it could be argued that in order to achieve levels of parent involvement in schooling, comparable to those in non-remote communities, adequate resourcing is a prerequisite.

red dirt

FIGURE 35: AVERAGE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES FOR VERY REMOTE SCHOOLS WITH >80% ABORIGINAL OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS COMPARED WITH AVERAGE PER STUDENT NET RECURRENT INCOME, 2009–2014



Source: My School (ACARA 2016)

Digging deeper

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Video links

Watch a short introduction to this topic



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