

# Red Dirt education leaders' perceptions about what is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

Schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote or 'Red Dirt' (Guenther, Disbray and Osborne, 2016) communities has been cast as 'problematic', and 'failing'. The solutions to deficit understandings of remote schooling are often presented as simple. But for those who work in red dirt schools, the solutions are not simple, and for education leaders positioned between the local 'red dirt' school and upward accountability (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) to departments of education they are complex.

Between 2011 and 2016, the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems project explored how education could better meet the needs of those living in remote communities. More than 1000 people with interests in remote education contributed to the research. Education leaders were identified as one stakeholder group. These leaders included school-based leaders, bureaucrats, community based leaders, and teacher educators preparing university graduates for 'red dirt' schools.

This paper focuses on what 'red dirt' education leaders think is important for schooling. The findings show school leaders as 'caught in the middle' (Gonzales and Firestone, 2013) between expectations communities, and of system stakeholders who drive policy, funding, and accountability measures. The paper concludes with some implications for policy and practice that follow on from the findings.

## Introduction

Schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote or 'Red Dirt' (Guenther et al., 2016) communities has been cast as 'problematic', and 'failing'. The 'problem' is sometimes described in terms of students' 'poor' academic performance (Hughes & Hughes, 2012). Sometimes it is described as an attendance problem (NESA, 2017). At other times it is a parental responsibility problem (Performance and Evaluation Branch, 2013), and often teacher quality (Lea et al., 2008) or 'teaching methods' (Anderson, 2012; Hughes & Hughes, 2012) is to blame for the 'parlous state' (Mackie et al., 2016) of remote Indigenous education.

School leaders and the institutions they represent are less often targeted as the problem and more often highlighted as potential solutions (Al-Yaman & Higgins, 2011; Davies, Forthcoming). School leaders, for example, are hardly mentioned in the latest Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report and the role of school leaders in influencing student achievement is all but ignored except in relation to 'unobserved' contributions of 'teacher and principal turnover' and 'Principal characteristics' (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2016, p. 13.11).

The purpose of this paper is not to critique the role of school leaders in remote education. Rather it is to compare and contrast what they think is important for remote schools in order to achieve better outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We then consider implications for red dirt leaders and communities, with particular attention to the Northern Territory, which has about half of all very remote schools (with predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) in Australia (see Guenther, 2013). The data presented is based on findings from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems (RES) project, which ran for five years between 2011 and 2016. The project's aim

was to uncover ways that outcomes for students who come from remote communities, could be improved. The findings of the project are well documented with more than 70 peer reviewed papers coming from the project (Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, 2017). The project team has also produced an e-book which summarises many of the findings in an accessible form (Guenther et al., 2016).

### Red dirt context

The remote Australian schools, which form the basis of the research presented here, in some ways look like other schools, with classrooms, teachers, students, curricula and a mix of other school teaching and learning resources. There are differences though. While on the one hand they are by definition 'remote'—a long way away from a capital city—the characteristic that makes them most different is their cultural location within communities where the ways of being (ontologies), valuing (axiologies), believing (cosmologies) and knowing (ontologies) are starkly different from the philosophical assumptions embedded in school systems (Guenther et al., 2013). These differences are often described as gaps or deficits, but if we were to view the education system from the 'red dirt' we would notice that it is the metropolitan that is remote, and we would see the disadvantage of teachers coming from their perceived places of privilege, not knowing the cultural norms or local language, not understanding the deep significance of kinship and connection to country and how these cultural and contextual factors specifically shape the social and learning environment of schools and classrooms.

In proposing the concept of 'red dirt' thinking, it is 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, while retaining a firm grasp on the pragmatic (red dirt) in the other.

## Literature

### The construction of school leadership roles

In education circles, there is a seemingly accepted narrative that school leaders make a difference. But how and why do they make a difference? While there is a connection between what school leaders do and student outcomes, it is at least to some extent, indirect. School leaders, according to Leithwood et al. (2004) perform three main functions: they set directions, develop people, manage organisations and improve instruction (see also Sun & Leithwood, 2015). They argue that these functions make a substantial contribution to learning outcomes. Mulford and Sillins (2011) agree, but add that underpinning these functions, leaders should build a trusting environment, articulate and review school goals and ensure that school structures support experimentation where learning arises from mistakes as well as success.

Another key function that is becoming increasingly important for Australian school leaders is 'parent and community engagement' (Department of Education and Training, 2015). While at some levels this function may be shared by teaching staff, the responsibility for engagement lies mostly with school leaders. Auerbach (2010) proposes a continuum of leadership for partnerships, where leaders work in one of four domains between preventing partnerships to building authentic partnerships, which she proposes is a 'reciprocal empowerment model, with families and educators co-constructing roles and engaging in dialogue and mutual learning' (p. 735). Not all leaders work in this way, and often system bureaucracies work against achieving the kind of collaboration envisaged by

Auerbach. Further, the academic literature is not universally supportive of the premises underpinning community engagement (Lea et al., 2011). However, it is a focus of governments in Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2015; Northern Territory Department of Education, 2015) and has a direct impact on how school leaders work.

Our own work in remote schools reveals three broad types of engagement pursued by schools and the systems they work within (see Guenther et al., 2016 for a full discussion). The first is 'targeted engagement', best represented by strategies such as the Remote School Attendance Strategy and the School Enrolment and Attendance Strategy, which seek to engage particular groups of people because they fail to comply with system demands. The second type of engagement is one we have described as a 'mutual benefit engagement' model. This is exemplified by initiatives such as the NT Department of Education's Transition Support Unit, or programs like Families and Schools Together (<http://www.fastnt.org.au/>) where the impetus for engagement is built on some kind of shared benefit. This kind of engagement is still mostly initiated by leadership within the school or the system. The third type is which we describe 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. An example of this kind of partnership is seen in the Yiriman project (<http://www.yiriman.org.au/partners/>) and Children's Ground (<https://www.childrensground.org.au/>).

### School leadership in remote Australian schools

Osborne (2014), in his article titled 'The trouble with hearing' shares the difficulties that a non-local remote school principal has hearing the voices of Anangu (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara) colleagues in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of South Australia. He describes that this is in part due to the different philosophical assumptions that principals, Anangu school staff and community members bring into schools. But he also describes a difference between 'rhetoric and reality':

*In Anangu communities, community rhetoric tends to support (or mirror) the Piranpa-led conversation about the need for school and a Western education for Anangu children. This can be baffling for Piranpa educators when children are then seemingly afforded the option of arriving at school hours late, or even not at all. The reality of relatively poor levels of school engagement seems completely at odds with the rhetoric of overwhelming support for the need for schooling and Western education as being critically important for the children's futures.*  
(Osborne, 2014, p. 9)

It may be relatively easy to accept that principals and Aboriginal people in remote communities will have different ways of thinking (epistemologies), different ways of being (ontologies), different values (axiologies) and different beliefs about our place in the world (cosmologies). Phillips and Luke (2017, p. 1265) explain that: "Indigenous standpoints on education are different in perspective, experience, belief and aspiration than those of non-Indigenous school leaders and teachers." It follows then that "Indigenous communities have different criteria for what counts as 'success' beyond and in addition to test scores and other conventional measures" (Phillips and Luke, p. 1260).

Osborne (2017) argues that power-laden dialogue between institutional representatives (including school leaders) and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities tends to elicit what Liberman (1980) describes as 'gratuitous concurrence', where the less powerful participant in a conversation attempts to mirror the views and assertions being presented, often by responding with a 'yes' response. While gratuitous concurrence is common globally amongst

Indigenous peoples as a mode of respectful social interaction and avoidance of potential conflict, gratuitous concurrence is made more likely in any context wherever unequal power occurs. Osborne (2017) explains:

*The institutions of education administration and of government have greatest power, but without power-sensitive dialogue they tend to redistribute unequal power by cleaving to implicit 'common sense' assumptions and paying particular attention to the perceived needs of the system. (p. 260)*

Under such conditions, community narratives can act as a cloudy mirror of logic, values and assumptions that are foreign to the local community context (Osborne, 2014) and act as an unreliable guide for informing principal-led actions towards improving education.

Further, principals find themselves 'caught in the middle' (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013, p. 395) between the (at times) competing demands of the school, the local community and an 'upward accountability' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) environment, where accountability to the systems they are located within holds the dominant voice. For Aboriginal school leaders this feeling is probably stronger. Kamara (2017) in an examination of five women Aboriginal leaders in the Northern Territory, described the women as 'robed in chameleon images to survive the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds' (p. 137). She describes fear of ostracism from within the community and apprehension of being accepted in western professional circles.

The problem for leaders in remote communities extends beyond a recognition of difference. Blackmore (2010, p. 57), for example argues that: "For leaders, addressing how white privilege works is critical". Issues of power and privilege play an important role in the dynamics of remote schools (Osborne & Guenther, 2013b). Effecting change to address issues of power and control is not easy, even when the required resources and intent are available. For example, the Stronger Smarter Institute's Learning Communities program, invested heavily in changing school attitudes and increasing expectations of success. The evaluation report found in relation to attempts to changing perceptions:

*That despite these efforts, the general Indigenous community view and experience is that schools continue to work from deficit assumptions that preclude student enfranchisement, academic improvement and genuine community involvement and governance. (Luke et al., 2013, p. 406)*

While being located in geographically 'remote' community might seem like it is a significant challenge, the greater problem for remote leaders is 'cultural distance' (Yunupingu et al., 1995, p. 55). Managing the expectations of system bureaucracies, school staff, communities and students at the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2007) is difficult and requires a particular set of skills. 'Making a difference' as school leaders in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education requires expertise in the double work of leading a school and all this entails (staffing, curriculum, facilities, finances, leading a change and improvement process) while negotiating the dual epistemological space of the social and cultural locations of the school and the red dirt context of the students' lives. Against this backdrop, successful 'community engagement' requires school leaders to leverage the community based assets (Moll et al., 1992; Zipin, 2013) of the students' families, language, identity, histories and aspirations in shaping an education that is culturally and contextually responsive and better positioned to 'make a difference'.

## Methodology

The methodology used in this research was underpinned by several 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 (the authors) 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 creates a tension for us as researchers, where our goals include the promotion of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices (Guenther et al., 2015b). 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.

While the RES project was built on a mixed methods approach, the findings presented in this paper are based on the qualitative data collected. 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. Data collected from the physical sites included 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).

## 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?

## Analysis and sources

The analysis draws on a range of data sources as tabulated below in Table 1. 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 Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> stakeholders and made these

---

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

references quantifiable. We also allocated a ‘node’ to school leaders so we could separate their responses from other respondents. We defined these stakeholders as Aboriginal people who resided and came from a remote location, as defined by the ABS (2014) remoteness structure, or with a strong family connection to a remote location. In this paper, 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 1: 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>3665</b>	<b>1126</b>	

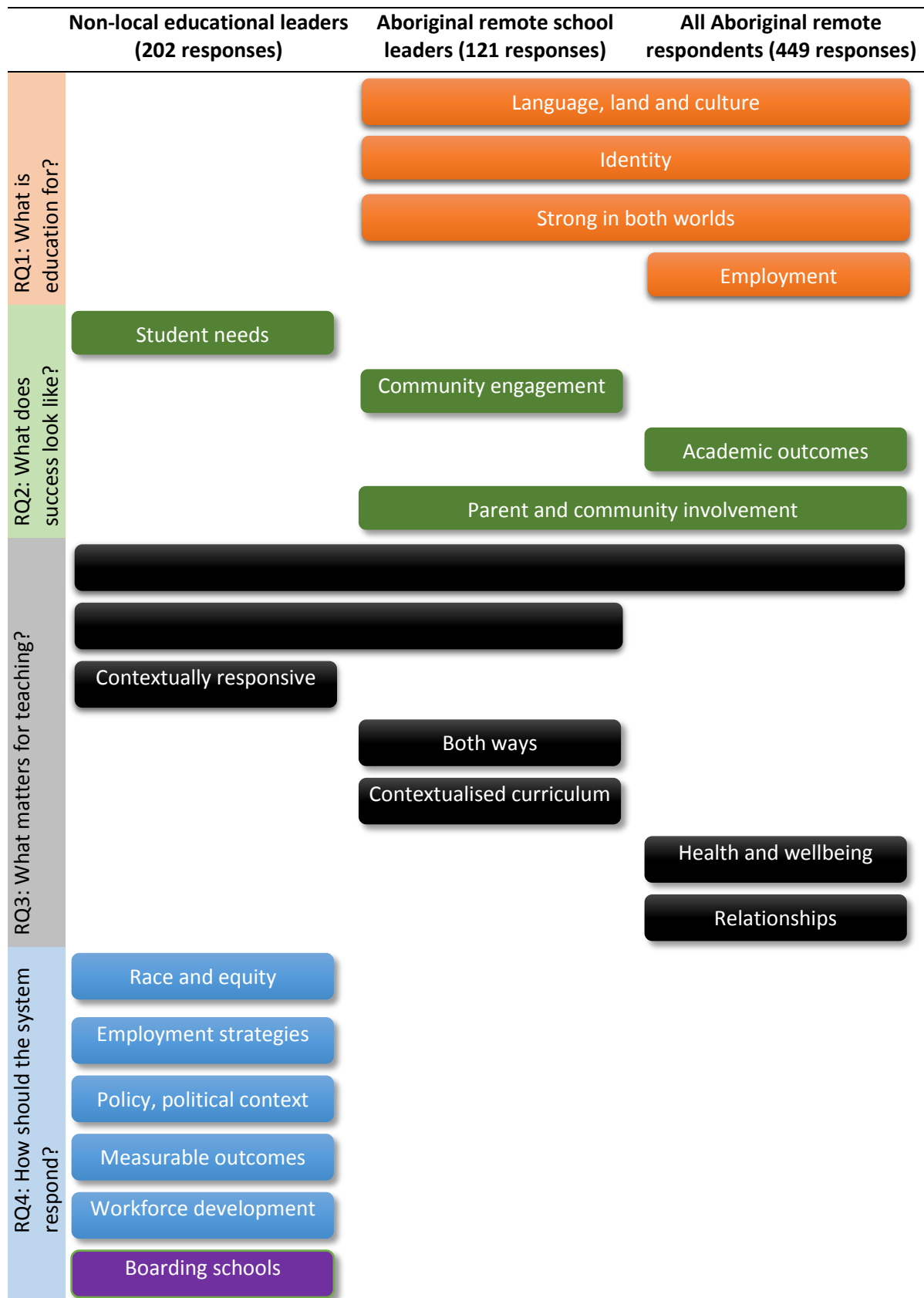
- \* Includes coding references assigned outside of the RQs
- † Note that some survey reports used for this analysis did not detail the participant numbers.

## Findings

The presentation of findings here focus on three groups of respondents: non-local educational leaders, remote Aboriginal educational leaders, and all remote Aboriginal respondents. The second group of Aboriginal educational leaders is a subset of the first. We defined ‘educational leaders’ as those who had a leadership role in remote education: current and former principals and assistant principals, regional directors and coordinators, union leaders and bureaucrats who had a leadership role in education.

Figure 1, below highlights the top ten themes that each group raised, grouped according to the research question they answer. The descriptors associated with themes are shown in Appendix 1, Table 2. We suggest that these themes are what each group considers most important. Note that the 20 broad themes represent one-quarter of all the themes raised by respondents and those themes shown in the figure below, do not represent all the responses for each group, just the top 10.

Figure 1. Main issues raised by respondent type



What stands out from the data shown below is that there is little intersection between the top priorities of non-remote school leaders and community member. There is however, one area of concern that is shared by all groups: the need for local language Aboriginal teachers. Non-local school leaders tended to see the role of local Aboriginal staff from a school or system perspective either as role models for other staff and students, or in the context of employment strategy targets. For example one leader talked about local staff as mentors:

*You could see the mentoring going on every single night.. That was really important. Then the clear mentoring of people through the system was a key one. There are some real workforce strategies you can put into place and yes there are so many people who want to be experienced, ongoing, career AIEOs.*

Some remote Aboriginal respondents also felt that mentoring was important:

*We need local Indigenous teaching staff, training and mentoring for the next generation of teachers, as many who trained in the 1980s have or will soon retire.*

However, the largest number of remote community response discussed the role of local staff in maintaining culture and teaching language:

*We should be inviting Anangu from the community to come and teach Anangu culture. The Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and Anangu teachers should be teaching them to read and write in the local language.*

Regardless of the similarities and differences in responses, the common belief that local language Aboriginal staff make a difference to remote education, was strong.

A second stand-out feature of the figure is the strong focus of non-local leaders on systemic issues: employment strategies, policy and political contexts, measurable outcomes, workforce development and issues of race and equity. Boarding schools emerged as a top-ten theme which cuts across all our research questions. The race and equity issue does not sound like a systemic issue, but it emerged in discussions about how remote children learn. For example, the top down, one size fits all approaches were a problem for some leaders:

*Different communities and their kids will need to learn in different ways so that they have an equal chance of getting to that particular end point. So I've got some real arguments with the system and the way they're forcing us to think about education.*

Another non-remote leader grappled with similar issues:

*It's a huge pressure on educators to do that and it's a real, it becomes a moral dilemma... Does what we're doing reflect what communities want, what the kids want or is it what we want for them, having these high expectations and feeling like there needs to be equity and access for all?*

Another senior bureaucrat positioned thoughts on systemic responsibilities in terms of human rights, before returning to the more familiar territory of outcomes:

*We can only do what we've got a statutory responsibility to do which is to provide kids with education. We've got an international responsibility and human rights agreements to make sure Indigenous people get the same opportunities as non-*



*indigenous people... What our responsibility as an education system is, to the people within all the communities--what we're equipped, skilled and qualified to do, and charged to do by our ministers and the people who fund these services, and how we can negotiate the outcomes that everybody is trying to get to. I'm not sure that we're clear about what that is.*

There were many other instances where non-local leaders grappled with how to juggle the seemingly contradictory and elusive goals 'that everybody is trying to get to' and the responsibilities under human rights agreements. However, non-local leaders were also grappling with other system drivers such as the changing policy and political context, workforce development needs, and employment strategies. In some cases, the issues were all rolled in together, as with this exchange during a focus group discussion on the issue of workforce development where rights and equity are woven into a broader discussion about staff housing:

*The classic example is where [community leader] was living in a lean-to as a principal... You've got graduates coming up from Melbourne or whatever with no prior experience in Indigenous communities who are getting a three-bedroom house to themselves.*

*The government offers housing and still has those rules but they're all broken. When I was in the Kimberley, one of the local Aboriginal stuff, I just broke the rules and put them in housing.*

*We've got [local school leader] out at [community] who lives in a council house, has to pay rent, has to pay the electricity and gas and what not now. We've got a co-principal there with her, [name] who is white, she gets a free house and everything free whereas [local school leader] doesn't.*

The issues of teacher housing, policy, workforce development and employment strategies are all important issues for educational leaders who are responsible for decision making at a school, department or regional level. However, the data shows that these issues are relatively less important to both remote Aboriginal leaders and community members. For these people, what happens in the community, at the school and in the classroom are at the fore of their thinking. Remote Aboriginal leaders have particular concerns about processes of teaching and learning: learning both ways, engaging with a contextualised curriculum, and engaging with the community. Sometimes these issues come together, for example in this comment from a remote Aboriginal leader, who describes bringing together elders (engaging the community) with a discussion about (contextualised) curriculum because 'they wanted language and culture to be taught in schools' (a both ways approach).

*One way that we have tried to get our people and our knowledge into the schools is with that curriculum. Well me and [non-Indigenous academic] worked on the curriculum, getting everything from the elders, because they wanted language and culture to be taught in the school. We went around recording the things they wanted taught in the school to their children. And it's in that curriculum, that's just been sitting on the shelf, which is so rich.*

Remote Aboriginal leaders shared several key concerns with other remote community members, particularly in terms of what education is for (language, land and culture, identity and being strong in both worlds) and how success is defined (in terms of parent and community involvement). For

example one remote Aboriginal educational leader described the connection between language and identity:

*We believe that our children are happier learning first in their own language. They have more confidence in learning, in themselves and they learn more effectively.*

One remote Aboriginal principal shared his thoughts about the importance of an holistic view of success that brings community members along:

*If we talk about success, it needs to be holistic, it needs to involve the community. Too often, remote community schools or schools in remote areas set themselves up as islands and they set themselves up as the institution that is going to resolve the issue with Indigenous people when in reality that's not the case.*

Another community remote Aboriginal leader shed a different light on how different knowledge systems work to achieve different ends.

*Kardiya way is for preparing you for life, they educate you. The other way, Yapa way is equipping for life. That's what I call it. Kardiya way - It's almost like feeling like learning more and more about nothing, that's how it feels. Whereas Yapa way, you learn more and gain more. That's how it feels as a Yapa for me. When I look at the Kardiya educating system, there's something not quite right about it. Maybe because some people like to like go there and just work there for each day, instead of leaving a mark with kids*

Yet another remote Aboriginal leader, echoing the feelings of her community, observed how confidence (identity) is connected 'through our spirits', and in turn through strong families (parent and community involvement).

*Our children will grow strong in their learning at school when their families stand with them as that strong solid rock. They will be strong and confident through our spirits. We are using our spirits as a foundation for the children. If the child's parents are weak, then the extended family will come alongside him to support him.*

Figure 1 also highlights issues that are priorities for community members but are not high on the list of important concerns for either non-local leaders or remote Aboriginal leaders. These priorities include employment pathways beyond school (in response to what education is for), academic outcomes (in response to what success looks like) as well as health and wellbeing, and relationships (in response to teaching to success). We have described in some detail what these priorities look like elsewhere (see for example Guenther et al., 2015a; Guenther et al., 2016; Osborne, 2013; Osborne & Guenther, 2013a) but the point to note is that what counts as important for one group is not such a high priority for another (See also descriptors at Appendix 1, Table 2)

## Discussion

The contrasting views of non-local education leaders and their remote Aboriginal counterparts, is of course a reflection of their different ontological, epistemological, cosmological and axiological positions. But are these positions mutually exclusive? Do the competing priorities of non-local leaders and those of remote Aboriginal leaders mean that the voices of community members are

ignored? And what can non-local leaders do to overcoming their apparent blindness to the priorities of community members and remote Aboriginal leaders? We now turn our attention to discuss these issues.

### Mutually exclusive priorities?

While many principals and educational leaders more generally may to a degree feel 'caught in the middle' (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013) our data shows that non-local leaders tend to be more focused on system priorities than on community priorities. In the remote school context, they are often masters of the 'island' (described above by an Aboriginal school leader) with little consideration of what lies in the sea surrounding them. This should not be a surprise. The ones who are 'caught in the middle' are the Aboriginal school leaders who know and understand community priorities (reflected in their responses shown at Figure 1), but who are also accountable to the departmental bureaucracies they serve and the professional demands of the peers they work with day to day. The tensions they feel are reflected in the concerns they have for 'both ways' approaches, a contextualised curriculum, and community engagement. In one sense these leaders can see and attempt to ameliorate the competing demands of communities and bureaucracies. Kamara's (2017) picture of principals as being robed in chameleon images is apt. We are not suggesting that non-local leaders are necessarily doing a bad job or that local leaders are doing a better job. Rather the point is that both groups feel the pull of pressures from those they are more closely aligned with.

The evidence shown here may suggest that system priorities about what matters and what communities think matters are largely mutually exclusive with very little overlap. Local Aboriginal leaders may act as a bridge or a broker between the two, but we cannot say for sure how effective they are in this role. There is one exception that cuts across all three groups—non-local leaders, local Aboriginal leaders and community members—the importance of local language Aboriginal teachers. 'Teachers' in the context of many remote schools does not necessarily mean 'registered four year university qualified' teachers. 'Teachers' can also be elders with cultural knowledge, local language teachers, and teacher assistants, who work in tandem with registered teachers to educate children.

Pursuing employment and workforce development strategies (a priority for non-local leaders) with a focus on local workforce recruitment and training, could well support community aspirations for education. To this end the partnership between the Northern Territory Department of Education and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education to upskill Assistant Teachers, is a practical demonstration of how local workforce development can be achieved (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2016b). However, according to My School data for the Northern Territory, 44 schools (about half of all very remote schools) did not employ any non-teaching staff, even though research tells us that local staff matter for improved educational outcomes and attendance (Guenther & Disbray, 2015). There is still some way to go.

### How can community voices make themselves heard?

The impetus of large bureaucratic systems can at times seemingly stifle community voice as strategies (like the NT Department of Education's Indigenous Education Strategy) are 'rolled out'. The activity and 'noise' of activities (such as the Transition Support Unit or the Remote School Attendance Strategy) can drown out the voices of those who have alternative priorities in remote communities. The message we received from community members in the RES project was overwhelming: 1) that education should support local language, culture and identities; and 2) that success is very much about parents and communities being involved in education. The Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness scheme (ASSPA) was one structure that facilitated community voice in schools. It was abolished in 2005 and not replaced with anything comparable.

The 2014 Wilson Review (Wilson, 2014, p. 66) noted that “There is no independent Indigenous body with a mandate and responsibility to speak on behalf of Indigenous people on educational matters.” The NT Indigenous Education Advisory Council, established in 1999 following the Collins Review (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999) was abandoned in 2015 leaving a single senior policy officer as the only ‘Indigenous education’ advisor on the NT Department of Education Executive Board (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2016a). This is not to suggest that the Department of Education has no access to community voice; rather its current structures make it difficult for community members to be heard. The plan to develop school community engagement charters (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2016d) in schools may well be a response to the need for community involvement, but to date few charters have been developed. These strategic directions give weight to the important function of community engagement suggested earlier in the literature (Auerbach, 2010).

It is then left for communities and regions to self-organise in such a way as to be heard. The Yothu Yindi Foundation’s North East Arnhem Land Education Stakeholder Consultations is one example of where regional representation to government has been effective in achieving locally driven outcomes (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2016c). Notably in this case, the new boarding facility at Nhulunbuy demonstrates what can be achieved. Other regional bodies such as the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust, may in the future follow this route. However, that still leaves about 70 remote community schools in the Northern Territory with little say in what happens in their schools. There is still some way to go.

### What can non-local educational leaders do to hear the voices of community members?

As noted earlier, the RES project found and worked with many non-local leaders who were not only interested in hearing community voices, but who actively sought to listen. The strategies they used included employing local people. For example, one leader said he would employ anyone who wanted a job at the school. This might seem extreme, but for him this strategy worked. Another strategy was to have an active school council. Many remote school leaders found this challenging—ensuring that all family groups or clans are represented can be difficult. We have noted the importance of training or professional learning as a vehicle for engagement. Some principals went out of their way to ensure that local staff had opportunities for both formal training and non-formal learning, such as attending conferences and participating in reference groups. Some principals brought in third party programs such as FAST to facilitate engagement between schools and communities (see for example Guenther, 2011; Guenther, 2014). Others ensured that cultural activities with local involvement were high priorities. There is of course no magic formula for this, and applying red dirt thinking to the problem of community engagement (which is what these educational leaders did) allows for a contextualised and culturally responsive approach.

At a system level, red dirt thinking would ensure that accountability measures were not just about national priorities (such as Closing the Gap), but would demand measurement of achievement against community engagement outcomes. We propose several measures that could work in this regard (Guenther et al., 2016 see chapter 13):

- 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?

There are of course other measures that could better reflect the local ways of knowing, being, valuing and believing that we pointed to in the literature. The might include aspects of resourcing for local language teaching, learning on country activities, inclusion of local histories, aspects of law and the local environment in curriculum. To the best of our knowledge, these measures are not currently part of accountability frameworks for remote schools. There is still some way to go.

## Conclusions

The evidence presented in this paper points to some key differences in what non-local, Aboriginal remote leaders and remote Aboriginal community respondents think is most important for a good education in remote community schools. For non-local leaders, most of their concerns were focused on systemic responses to educational issues. Remote Aboriginal leaders and community members were strongly focused on the more philosophical questions about what education is for (particularly in relation to language, land, culture and identity), and then on how success is defined and how teachers should teach to those views of success.

There was one point that all respondent groups agreed on: the need for local language Aboriginal teachers. Each group recognised the value of recruiting and training local staff. They were seen as important vehicles for successful education delivery. Further, they were seen to be intrinsically important to school-community engagement strategies. While in other areas, our data may suggest that the concerns of non-local leaders and community members are mutually exclusive, we suggest that building a local workforce can facilitate desirable outcomes for all stakeholders in remote schools. On the one hand they can (and do) deliver better outcomes for attendance and academic achievement, and on the other they are a source for inspiration and improved capacity within communities.

We have used the refrain ‘there is still some way to go’ in each of our points about the implications of divergent priorities, about how community voices can be heard, and what non-local educational leaders can do to hear. However, we also recognise the progress that many non-local and local Aboriginal leaders make as they apply their own version of red dirt thinking to achieve better outcomes for students.

## References

- ABS. (2014, 10 June 2014). Remoteness Structure. Retrieved October 2011, from <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure>
- Ainscow, M. (2005). Developing inclusive education systems: what are the levers for change? *Journal of Educational Change*, 6(2), 109-124. doi: 10.1007/s10833-005-1298-4
- Al-Yaman, F., & Higgins, D. (2011). *What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. Key learnings and gaps in the evidence*. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Retrieved November 2013 from

- [http://aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2011/what\\_works\\_to\\_overcome\\_disadvantage\\_2009-10.rtf](http://aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2011/what_works_to_overcome_disadvantage_2009-10.rtf)
- Anderson, A. (2012). *Address in Reply to the Northern Territory Assembly*. 23 October 2012, Darwin. Retrieved October 2012 from <http://resources.news.com.au/files/2012/10/24/1226502/593050-alison-anderson-full-speech.pdf>
- Auerbach, S. (2010). Beyond Coffee with the Principal: Toward Leadership for Authentic School-Family Partnerships. *Journal of School Leadership*, 20(6), 728-757.
- Blackmore, J. (2010). 'The Other Within': race/gender disruptions to the professional learning of white educational leaders. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 13(1), 45-61. doi: 10.1080/13603120903242931
- Boomer, G. (1999). Pragmatic Radical Teaching and the Disadvantaged Schools Program *Designs on Learning: Essays on Curriculum and Teaching*. Canberra: Australian Curriculum Studies Association.
- Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation. (2017). Project Outputs: Remote Education Systems. Retrieved March 2017, from <http://crc-rep.com/remote-education-systems/project-outputs>
- Davies, J. (Forthcoming). *PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS THAT FACILITATE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION ACROSS DIVERSE SCHOOL CONTEXTS*. (Doctor of Education), Flinders University of South Australia.
- Department of Education and Training. (2015, 22 March 2015). Engaging parents in education. Retrieved May 2015, from <http://studentsfirst.gov.au/engaging-parents-education>
- Gonzalez, R. A., & Firestone, W. A. (2013). Educational tug-of-war: internal and external accountability of principals in varied contexts. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(3), 383-406. doi: doi:10.1108/09578231311311528
- Guenther, J. (2011). *Evaluation of FAST Galiwin'ku program*. Cat Conatus, Ulverstone. Retrieved May 2013 from [http://www.fastnt.org.au/documents/File/Galiwinku\\_FAST\\_evaluation\\_report.pdf](http://www.fastnt.org.au/documents/File/Galiwinku_FAST_evaluation_report.pdf)
- Guenther, J. (2013). *Towards educational advantage in very remote Australia: An analysis of 2012 NAPLAN data: what does it tell us about remote education in the last five years?* Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education, Adelaide. December 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2013/Guenther13.pdf>
- 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](http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/CR002_FASTatGillenPrimarySchool.pdf)
- 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. 1 December 2015. Retrieved from [http://www.academia.edu/19290693/WHY\\_LOCAL\\_STAFF\\_MATTER\\_IN\\_VERY\\_REMOTE\\_SCHOOLS](http://www.academia.edu/19290693/WHY_LOCAL_STAFF_MATTER_IN_VERY_REMOTE_SCHOOLS)
- Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2015a). 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>
- Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2016). *Red dirt education: a compilation of learnings from the Remote Education Systems project*. Retrieved from [http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/RedDirtEducation\\_CompilationLearningsRES\\_EBook.pdf](http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/RedDirtEducation_CompilationLearningsRES_EBook.pdf)
- Guenther, J., Osborne, S., Arnott, A., & McRae-Williams, E. (2015b). 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

- Hughes, H., & Hughes, M. (2012). *Indigenous Education 2012*. CIS policy monographs. Centre for Independent Studies Retrieved August 2015 from <http://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2015/07/pm129.pdf>
- Kamara, M. (2017). Remote and invisible: the voices of female Indigenous educational leaders in Northern Territory remote community schools in Australia. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 49(2), 128-143. doi: 10.1080/00220620.2017.1284765
- Lea, T., Thompson, H., McRae-Williams, E., & Wegner, A. (2011). Policy fuzz and fuzzy logic: researching contemporary Indigenous education and parent–school engagement in north Australia. *Journal of Education Policy*, 26(3), 321-339. doi: 10.1080/02680939.2010.509813
- Lea, T., Tootell, N., Wolgemuth, J., Halkon, C., & Douglas, J. (2008). *Excellence or Exit – Ensuring Anangu Futures through Education*. July 2008, Charles Darwin University Retrieved March 2017 from [http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/cdu\\_report.pdf](http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/cdu_report.pdf)
- Leithwood, K., Seashore, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Retrieved March 2017 from <http://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/2035/CAREI%20ReviewofResearch%20How%20Leadership%20Influences.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Liberman, K. (1980). Ambiguity and gratuitous concurrence in inter-cultural communication. *Human Studies*, 3(1), 65-85. doi: 10.1007/bf02331801
- Lincoln, S., Lynham, S., & Guba, E. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Vol. 4th Edition, pp. 97-128). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc.
- Luke, A., Cazden, C., & Coopes, R. (2013). A Summative Evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities Project : Vol 1 and Vol 2. Brisbane, QLD: Queensland University of Technology.
- Mackie, I., Shipway, B., Dutton, R., & MacLennan, G. (2016). The AEW Project: Professional Development for Teacher Aides in Remote Indigenous Communities. 2016, 4(11), 11. doi: 10.11114/ijss.v4i11.1922
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141. doi: 10.1080/00405849209543534
- Mulford, B., & Silins, H. (2011). Revised models and conceptualisation of successful school principalship for improved student outcomes. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 25(1), 61-82.
- Nakata, M. (2007). The Cultural Interface. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36(Supplement), 7-14.
- NESA. (2017). NESA RSAS Training Strategy Project. Retrieved March 2017, from <http://www.nesa-rsas.com.au/>
- Northern Territory Department of Education. (2016a). *Annual Report 2015-16*. Retrieved March 2017 from [https://education.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/379397/DOE\\_Annual-Report-2015-16\\_web.pdf](https://education.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/379397/DOE_Annual-Report-2015-16_web.pdf)
- Northern Territory Department of Education. (2016b, 18 April 2016). Indigenous Education Strategy Newsletter - Issue 2. Retrieved March 2017, from <https://education.nt.gov.au/education/statistics-research-and-strategies/indigenous-education-strategy/indigenous-education-strategy-newsletter-issue-2>
- Northern Territory Department of Education. (2016c, 18 April 2016). Indigenous Education Strategy Newsletter - Issue 5. Retrieved March 2017, from <https://education.nt.gov.au/education/statistics-research-and-strategies/indigenous-education-strategy/indigenous-education-strategy-newsletter-issue-5>
- Northern Territory Department of Education. (2016d, 27 April 2016). Indigenous Education Strategy Newsletter - Issue 7. Retrieved March 2017, from <https://education.nt.gov.au/education/statistics-research-and-strategies/indigenous-education-strategy/indigenous-education-strategy-newsletter-issue-7>

- Northern Territory Department of Education. (1999). *Learning Lessons—An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin: Northern Territory Government.
- Northern Territory Department of Education. (2015). *A Share in the Future: Indigenous Education Strategy, 2015-2024*. Retrieved August 2015 from [http://www.education.nt.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/39795/led\\_review\\_strategy\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.education.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/39795/led_review_strategy_brochure.pdf)
- Osborne, S. (2013). Kulintja Nganampa Maa-kunpuntjaku (Strengthening Our Thinking): Place-Based Approaches to Mental Health and Wellbeing in Anangu Schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 182-193. doi: doi:10.1017/jie.2013.25
- Osborne, S. (2014). Puṯuṯa kulini: The trouble with "hearing". *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 10(1), 3-14.
- Osborne, S. (2017). *Staging standpoint dialogue in tristate education: privileging Anangu voices*. (PhD), Victoria University, Melbourne.
- Osborne, S., & Guenther, J. (2013a). Red Dirt Thinking on Aspiration and Success. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(Special Issue 02), 88-99. doi: doi:10.1017/jie.2013.17
- Osborne, S., & Guenther, J. (2013b). 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: doi:10.1017/jie.2013.19
- Performance and Evaluation Branch. (2013). *Cape York Welfare Reform Evaluation*. 2012, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Retrieved September 2014 from [http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03\\_2013/cywr\\_evaluation\\_report\\_v1.2\\_0.pdf](http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2013/cywr_evaluation_report_v1.2_0.pdf)
- Phillips, J., & Luke, A. (2017). Two Worlds Apart: Indigenous Community Perspectives and Non-Indigenous Teacher Perspectives on Australian Schools. In W. T. Pink & G. W. Noblit (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Urban Education* (pp. 959-996). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing education policy*: Routledge.
- Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. (2016). *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators 2016*. Productivity Commission Retrieved February 2017 from <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016/report-documents/oid-2016-overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage-key-indicators-2016-report.pdf>
- Sun, J., & Leithwood, K. (2015). Direction-setting school leadership practices: a meta-analytical review of evidence about their influence. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 26(4), 499-523. doi: 10.1080/09243453.2015.1005106
- Wilson, B. (2014). *A share in the future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*. May 2014 Retrieved May 2014 from [http://www.education.nt.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/37294/A-Share-in-the-Future-The-Review-of-Indigenous-Education-in-the-Northern-Territory.pdf](http://www.education.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/37294/A-Share-in-the-Future-The-Review-of-Indigenous-Education-in-the-Northern-Territory.pdf)
- Yunupingu, M., Australia. Department of Employment, E., & Training. (1995). National review of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: final report. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Zipin, L. (2013). Engaging middle years learners by making their communities curricular: A Funds of Knowledge approach. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 33(3), 1 - 12.

## Appendix 1: Node descriptors

Table 2. Key themes and node descriptors

Education: what	1) What is education for in remote Australia?
-----------------	---



<b>is it for</b>	
Language, land and culture	Maintaining language and culture, connection to land, cultural role within community, continuity, transmission of knowledge, strong families, cultural capital, learning on country, family and kinship, respect, connection to business
Identity	Personal agency, belonging, getting to know other people, confidence, growing up strong, pride, strong in spirit, comfortable talking/interacting with whitefellas, issues of shame, sense of achievement, knowing who you are, cultural worth
Employment and economic participation	Paid work, getting a job, work experience
Strong in both worlds	Two languages, literacies, ways to act in both cultures, competence, secret white man's way, broker between cultures
<b>Success</b>	<b>2) What defines 'successful' educational outcomes from the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?</b>
Parent involvement and role models in child's education	Support, commitment and aspiration, role models, older family members leading the way for younger ones, community mentors, surrounded by leaders, parents helping students with homework, parent choices for children's education, having parents who work, parents encouraging children to attend
Academic outcomes	Measured against what is taught, literacy and numeracy, classroom-based achievement, 'performance', progress, reading and writing
Community engagement	ASSPA (Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness), community participation in schooling, authentic engagement, bringing expertise from the community into school, community consultation, improved communication, sharing in planning processes, school-community partnership agreements
Meeting student needs	Knowing students, tracking, individual assessment, responding to individual needs, case management, identifying strengths, preparing for transitions, support, understanding student context
<b>Teaching to achieve success</b>	<b>3) How does teaching need to change in order to achieve 'success' as defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?</b>
ESL and multilingual learning	Bilingual programs, language skills, need for mentoring, teacher awareness of language, use of first language, literacy in first language, creoles, teaching in first language
Relationships	Students, parents, other staff, Aboriginal Education Workers, communities more generally, listening, trust, communication, becoming part of the community
Contextually responsive	Being informed, differentiated approaches to teaching, understanding other agencies and supports that are available, collaborative approach to interagency, situational, understanding complexity, creative ways to engage, making learning valued by students, using Aboriginal knowledge, adaptive, flexible
Local language Aboriginal teachers	Includes Assistant Teachers, office staff, positions of importance for local staff, valued, supported, opportunities for development, cultural broker role
Health and wellbeing at school	Child's wellbeing at school is a priority, teasing, safety, school as a safe place, hearing, mental health, resilience, collaboration with health services, physical fitness, positive behaviours, personal hygiene, healthy food, showing respect
Contextualised curriculum	Reporting on progress and success, applying curriculum to the context, re-writing curriculum where appropriate, 'red dirt curriculum', ground up, learning on country
Both ways and two way	Generative spaces, knowledge exchanges, accreditation, privileging local knowledge
<b>System response</b>	<b>4) What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?</b>
Workforce development	Undergraduate teacher programs, recruitment, orientation, professional learning, ongoing support, induction processes, mentoring, dealing with churn 'renewing knowledge', Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, supportive environment, cultural security
Political, policy context	Impacts of politics and policies important consideration, actions driven by strategies of the day, e.g. national partnerships, closing the gap, recognise complexity, simple messages, bureaucratic involvement, construct of school, legislation
Reconciliation, race, equity and	Treaty, class and Aboriginality, equity, opportunity, language as an asset not a barrier, human rights, recognising the value

Aboriginality	
Measurable outcomes and NAPLAN	Accountability, testing, NAPLAN, alternative ways of measuring success
Employment strategies and conditions	Fly-in/Fly-out, Aboriginal strategies/policies, organisational level senior decision-making and leadership, supporting diversity, conditions of employment