

# Unlearning what we know is true: getting more from less in remote educational research

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## **Abstract**

Most researchers are on a quest for deeper understanding, new and greater knowledge and recognition of their learnings. We value critical thought. We often pride ourselves in finding ‘truth’. But what if we have got it all wrong? What happens if our own version of reality is so displaced that the things we learn and understanding we gain takes us away from the truth and not closer to it?

This presentation discusses research in the context of remote education, particularly in communities where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up most of the population. Educators often talk about scaffolding—building on a framework of past learnings. However, what happens when those of us who come from non-Indigenous backgrounds are confronted by a different culture, a different worldview, different values, is that we either become very confused because what we see does not match what we ‘know’ to be right and true, or we tend to make judgements about what we see based on what we ‘know’ to be right and true. Either way, we can easily end up with errant results and even more errant conclusions—unless we first unlearn our cultural assumptions and so begin to learn from those who belong to a different world.

John Guenther has for a number of years been part of and led research and evaluation projects across the Northern Territory. His experiences have led him to reflect on the research process in these complex and intellectually challenging contexts. As a non-Indigenous researcher he will share from these experiences—and in particular talk about what he has unlearned about himself, and then what he has gained from his experiences working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and community members.

## **1. Introduction**

Most researchers are on a quest for deeper understanding, new and greater knowledge and recognition of their learnings. We value critical thought. We often pride ourselves in finding ‘truth’. But what if we have got it all wrong? What happens if our own version of reality is so displaced that the things we learn and understanding we gain takes us away from the truth and not closer to it? The purpose of this paper is to explore what happens when we as researchers, are confronted with paradigms and ways of knowing that fall outside our frame of reference.

The paper will draw on the work of the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Remote Economic Participation in its Remote Education Systems (RES) project. While this work is just beginning and there are as yet no findings to report, as the project design emerges, there are still learnings that are worth sharing. The paper begins by outlining the context in which the CRC works before proceeding

to introduce the reader to a number of issues that affect education in remote Australia. The paper concludes with a number of implications for researchers who work in this space.

## 1.1 The Remote Education Systems project in a nutshell

The RES project will investigate how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations and aspirations/needs. It will identify models and strategies that work to improve learning outcomes for students in order to increase opportunities for engagement in meaningful livelihoods beyond school, and thereby contribute to increasing the capacity of their communities. The models and strategies will include approaches that a) enable communities, parents and caregivers to more actively engage in and influence their children's learning; b) enhance teaching quality with innovative opportunities for professional learning *in situ*; and c) offer new/innovative ways to support emerging livelihood opportunities in remote communities. A key focus of the project will be to bring out the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint as it applies to the above.

The research will use mixed methods approaches which will be built on a base of an action research process so that the research has opportunity to effect change on the basis of learnings. Quantitative methods will support the action research process, and will draw on school and community level data. The research team will work collaboratively with partners. The partners will include government and non-government agencies, local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members as researchers and research bodies (universities, private organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with research expertise). Study sites will include a range of learning/educational settings including remote community-based schools, remote 'Colleges' (as per NT based SSBF model) and urban boarding schools or colleges. The research will be guided by a steering committee, which will be asked to take an active role in the development of the project over its course.

## 1.2 Remote Australian context

Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data at 2006, Table 1 summarises population and land area characteristics of remote and very remote Australia. Remote and very remote Australia, as defined by ABS remote classifications comprises 85 per cent of the land area of Australia and at the time of the 2006 Census, 2.3 per cent of the population.

**Table 1. Remote and Very Remote Australia population and area, at 2006 Census**

State/Territory	Very remote area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Very remote population	Remote area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Remote population
Northern Territory	1267521.6	42,727	80058.5	41,266
New South Wales	193582.9	4,339	193836.5	32,072
Victoria	0	0	19347.8	4,622
Tasmania	3088.3	2,500	21220.8	7,286
South Australia	734203.3	13,265	152907.4	43,343
Western Australia	2174836.7	42,337	245070.6	86,667
Queensland	1214017.7	46,440	307238.1	79,435
Remote Australia	5587250.5	151608	1019680	294691
Per cent of Australia*	72.0%	0.8%	13.1%	1.5%

\*Area of Australia: 7759538.2km<sup>2</sup>, population at 2006 Census, 19,855,288  
Source: (ABS 2007a)

Table 2 demonstrates the high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the population in both remote regions, but more so in very remote Australia. The proportion varies by jurisdiction. In very remote Northern Territory, 72 per cent of the population identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. This figure reduces to 8.0 per cent in Tasmania. Based on this, it is fair to say that very remote Australia is a markedly different context within which to do research work. This difference, as we shall see later, should not be underestimated.

**Table 2. Remote and Very Remote populations: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders compared with total population, at 2006 Census**

	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population	Total population	Per cent of total population
Remote Australia	39407	294691	13.4%
Very Remote Australia	68729	151608	45.3%
Australia	455027	19,855,288	2.3%

Source: (ABS 2007a)

## 2. The education system in remote Australia

The education system in remote Australia is largely built on urban or regional models with all the assumptions that go with education in those locations. The one exception is the ‘School of the Air’ model, which is designed primarily for children who live on isolated cattle stations, national parks or road houses. While Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children are not excluded they are generally not well represented in the student population. For example, the *My School* website (ACARA 2010a) shows that the Katherine School of the Air records Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation as 18 per cent. One study, which included 135 students and 86 parents from Schools of the Air in New South Wales and the Northern Territory, indicated that only two per cent of students identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders (Crump et al. 2010).

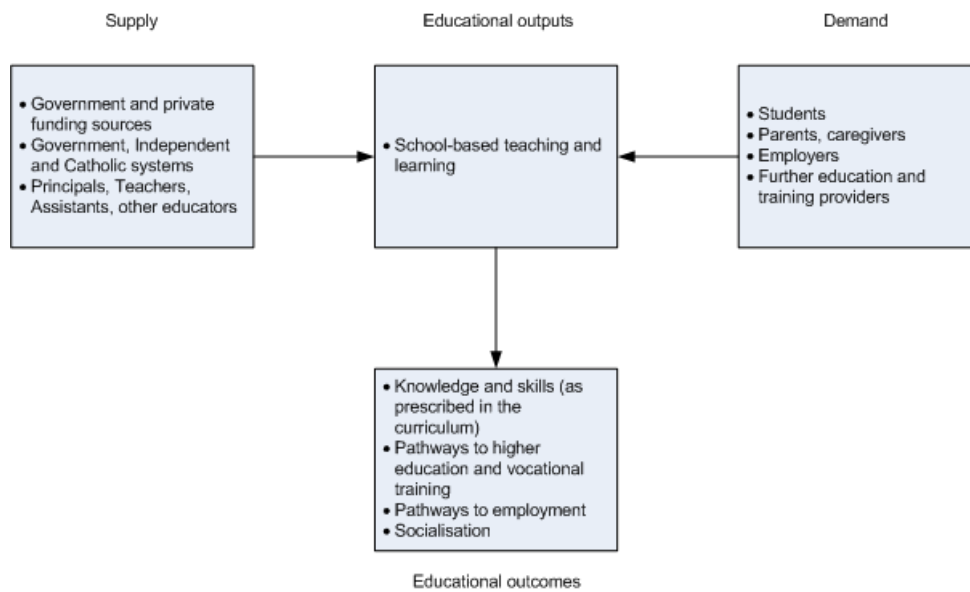
The other models used for education of students in remote communities tend to be either community-based schools or boarding schools. Some boarding schools are set up specifically for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students (for example Tiwi College, Yirara College, Djarragun College). Most boarding options for remote students are based in urban settings where to varying degrees, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are integrated into a mainstream program (for example Marrara Christian College, Immanuel College, the Wiltja Program at Woodville High School and Kormilda College).

In terms of education for students who stay in very remote communities there is little choice but to participate (or not) in what is offered at the ‘local’ school—not all very remote communities have a school campus. Based on an analysis of the *MySchool* website, there are 254 schools located in very remote Australia in six jurisdictions. About 100 of these have enrolments of less than 40 students. About one-third are located in the Northern Territory. About one-third (85) of the schools are primary only schools. Another 14 are secondary only and the balance are combined primary/secondary schools with varying secondary endpoints. The large majority (91 per cent) are government schools that operate under the direction of State and Territory departments of education.

Yet, the expectation in the mainstream is that the universal model of educational supply and demand follows a schema like that shown below in Figure 1. Government and private providers are

funded to deliver an education with the help of school staff in a school-based environment. Demand for education in this model is essentially driven by students and their parents/carers, employers and industry as well as higher education and training providers. In this (over)simplified model, the shared expectation of those on the demand and supply side is that students will complete their compulsory education with all the knowledge and skills required by the curriculum, ready for work or further education and training, having been socialised in the system to conform to the norms and values of the broader society.

**Figure 1. Simplified supply/demand/outcome model of mainstream education**



However, in remote communities there are problems with this simplified model (which it could be argued works quite well in metropolitan, regional and rural communities). On the supply side, the system as it is, is plagued by issues of teacher turnover, teacher quality, pre-service teacher training, recruitment, housing, leadership, workload and feelings of isolation for staff who relocate. These issues are all well documented in the research literature (see for example Roberts 2005; Education Workforce Initiatives 2007; Lock 2008; Hudson et al. 2009; Sharplin 2009; Department of Education 2011).

The problem on the demand side—at least as it is often articulated by the mainstream—is that parents are not sending their children to school. And so the mantra “We know children need to go to school every day in order to get the best possible education” (see for example Burns et al. 2010), is oft repeated and seldom unpacked. The solution for the ‘problem’ often translates into finding ways of helping young people fit within or adapt better to the education system. Alternatively, parents are penalised for apparently not taking their responsibility seriously.

A number of organisations run locally specific programs and activities that are designed to engage or re-engage young people in education (see Maughan 2010). There is some evidence to suggest that the initiatives, incentives and programs described by Maughan do work to some extent to improve outcomes for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. However, many of the initiatives are targeted (for example for potential leaders and those with sporting ability) and the questions remain about what happens to those who are not able to join in on those programs. The evidence—at least in terms of mainstream measures of success (see Figure 2 and Figure 3 below)—would suggest that little has changed for those who cannot participate in these programs.

The high attrition rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders participating in secondary remote schools suggests that for the majority of students there is little in the current education system to attract them or keep them there. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2011) shows that in 2008, 10 per cent of non-Indigenous young people aged 15 to 19 were neither studying nor had completed Year 12 or a higher qualification while for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in remote areas of Australia, almost 40 per cent were neither studying nor had completed Year 12 or a higher qualification. The data presented by the ABS in this case only shows remote Australia. It is likely that the difference would be much greater for very remote Australia.

While much of the research and literature assumes the education system as a given, and therefore assumes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders must fit within it, little attention is given to imagining a remote education system that would change in such a way to make it attractive for those living in very remote communities to stay in school (if there indeed is one there) to complete year 12. It is fair to say that changing the system is probably the harder of the two tasks. But at a local level it may be possible to model a system that does work to make it not only attractive but effective for remote communities to engage in formal learning for longer than they currently do.

## 2.1 Education for what?

One of the major concerns for educators and community members in very remote Australian communities is the question about what education leads to. In the mainstream the links to economic participation in the paid workforce, or to further education and training are well entrenched. Families know that in order to ‘succeed’ in a competitive labour market, students must continue to engage in learning at least to—if not beyond—Year 12 (Sarra 2011). This is a major driver for participation. It is also well documented in the Australian and international research literature that family education history, aspirations and support are perhaps even more significant for increasing young peoples’ attainment in formal education (see for example De Bortoli et al. 2010; OECD 2010).

Despite the common view that ‘there are no real jobs in remote communities’ there are arguably many—if not abundant—opportunities for meaningful livelihoods to be made out of remote communities, particularly in a policy environment which targets remote service delivery. The greatest paid work opportunities exist in mining, local government services, health care services, education, land and sea management, tourism and accommodation services, and retail services. Based on Census data (ABS 2007b) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are generally under-represented in most industry groups—especially those that require higher level qualifications. The notable exceptions are ‘inadequately described’, ‘health care and social assistance’ and ‘public administration and safety’. Here, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation comprises predominantly part time, low skilled work. The point of this discussion is that education *could be* for the kind of jobs that non-Indigenous workers are currently taking but it is not achieving those outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who reside in those parts of very remote Australia.

If education is not for many of the kind of jobs listed above (which non-Indigenous people are taking), what then is it for? What then should it be for? In the field of adult learning, considerable research has been carried out in remote Australian contexts to find out what learning is for. The literature reports that adults do indeed want to learn for paid work outcomes—but these outcomes may look somewhat different than they do in the mainstream (see for example Young et al. 2007). But they also have a number of other reasons for wanting to learn. Kral and Falk (2004), for example showed that literacy acquisition was motivated in part by the need to be able to read texts in a church context. In two separate studies, Guenther et al (2010; 2011), for example showed that beyond learning for work, remote learners are interested in understanding how the ‘whitefella’

world works and that training is about creating a space—a kind of cultural interface—where learning can be mediated.

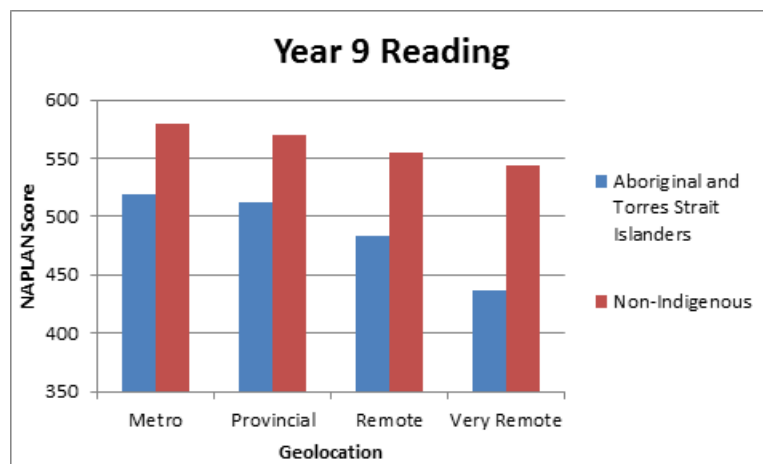
The question of ‘education for what?’ is not so clearly defined in the research literature for the compulsory education sector. There is often a tacit assumption that education in remote contexts is for exactly the same purposes as education in the mainstream—but what the data shows is that for one reason or another the skills and knowledge required for the kinds of jobs that ‘whitefellas’ take, are not being taken up to any large extent by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

## 2.2 Measures of success

One of the primary indicators used to measure success in Australian schools are the standardised tests that measure achievement in areas of English language, literacy and numeracy. Attendance and retention (particularly to year 12) are other measures used to define success. It is on the basis of these measures that the ‘disadvantage’ described by the Productivity Commission (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2011) must be ‘overcome’. These measures of success are often assumed to be universally agreed to by all involved in the compulsory education sector. Indeed, the *What Works* program, which is designed to help educators improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across Australia, talks a lot about the ingredients and indicators of ‘success’, without ever questioning what ‘success’ actually is—particularly from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint (see for example *What Works* 2010; *What Works* 2011).

If it is reasonable to suggest that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint is different from that held by the mainstream—and there is ample evidence to suggest there is (Nakata 2007; Yunkaporta 2009; Tur et al. 2010)—then why should not ‘educational success’ be constructed differently from a locally derived Aboriginal standpoint? This question begs for an answer. Even if there were no alternative standpoint, the apparent failures of the current ‘remote education system’ demand more than an incremental change response. The apparent failure of the system in achieving results by the standards it purports to measure is evident in the reports that come in annually from ACARA. Figure 2 below, exemplifies the difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and others for the year 9 group. While it is evident from this and other data based on geolocation that results deteriorate with remoteness even for non-Indigenous students the difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other students increases with remoteness.

Figure 2. Year 9 Reading results by geo-location and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, 2010



Source: (ACARA 2010b)

There are of course problems with accepting NAPLAN data at face value in very remote contexts where English is not the first language spoken at home. There is some critique in the literature of the appropriateness of NAPLAN assessment processes for those who speak another language other than English (not necessarily only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) and those who come from a cultural background where mainstream values are not present (see for example Klenowski et al. 2010) . It may be that assessment processes only serve to reinforce a view of entrenched failure without offering hope for improvement. Would assessment processes that on the one hand consider achievement but on the other hand consider student potential be a better way to address the learning needs of remote students?

### **2.3 Policy context in remote Australia**

There has been a concerted effort over recent years to ‘close the gap’ of disadvantage between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians. Education, while not necessarily central to all policy responses, invariably cannot be separated from the policy or social context in which it is delivered. While the brief discussion here starts with events of 2007, it is acknowledged that there has been any number of inquiries and subsequent policy responses that have to a large extent failed to make significant progress in addressing inequities that exist between mainstream Australia and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In 2007 the ‘*Little Children Are Sacred*’ Report (Wild et al. 2007) highlighted a range of issues for the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse in the Northern Territory. The response from the Australian Government to the Wild-Anderson report, described as ‘The Intervention’ included a range of measures under the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER): ‘The immediate aims of the NTER measures were to protect children and make communities safe’ (NTER Review Board 2008). The measures included changes to welfare, including income management, a number of law and order provisions including some quite specific prohibitions against alcohol, drugs and pornography, changes to CDEP, housing, leasing of land and the creation of ‘prescribed communities’. In its initial roll-out, no consideration was given to education.

The so-called Mulligan inquiry, *Children On Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands Commission of Inquiry: A report into sexual abuse* (Mullighan 2008) again highlighted the contextual factors that affect service delivery in the remote communities of the APY Lands. Recent media attention about the APY Lands has highlighted the need for considerably more work to be done in that part of South Australia, to address issues of poverty, service delivery failures and concerns about educational outcomes.

Subsequent to these inquiries, reports and the NTER there has been a concerted effort on the parts of Australian and State/Territory governments to address educational issues in remote communities. These have been highlighted briefly earlier. There has probably never been a time when so many financial resources and so much attention has been given to the perceived needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Despite the attention, at least in terms of key indicators of school attendance and enrolments, little if any progress has been made. The most recent *Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory Monitoring Report* (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2011) from which Figure 3 is derived, shows that in the two years between 2009 and 2011, total school enrolments have declined by 46 and attendance rates have also declined by 1.8 percentage points.

**Figure 3. School attendance and enrolment figures for Prescribed Communities in the Northern Territory**

	Feb 2009		Feb 2010		% Points Change in A Feb 09-Feb 10	Feb 2011		% Points Change in A Feb 09-Feb 2011
	E	A	E	A		E	A	
Preschool	853	56.70%	741	57.0%	.3%	771	57.3%	.6%
Primary	5638	68.5%	5731	63.2%	-5.3%	5751	65.9%	-2.6%
Middle	1600	63.0%	1568	59.1%	-3.9%	1482	61.4%	-1.6%
Senior	870	48.7%	846	47.7%	-1%	910	48.9%	.2%
<b>TOTAL*</b>	<b>8960</b>	<b>64.5%</b>	<b>8885</b>	<b>60.5%</b>	<b>-4%</b>	<b>8914</b>	<b>62.7%</b>	<b>-1.8%</b>

Note: E = Enrolment A = Attendance. \* Weighted average of attendance of each level

Source: (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2011)

The declines in attendance rates are most notable in the primary and middle years while declines in enrolments are most notable in the preschool and middle years of schooling. The Report does not conclude this, but it would seem that by any measure the educational initiatives designed to effect changes in school participation, have largely failed.

### **3. Researching and researchers in the remote education context**

I have posed several questions and raised a number of issues in the above discussion and the answers to these have implications for researchers—and particularly those engaged in educational research. Those of us who have grown up in the education system have by and large been conditioned to accept the education system as a non-negotiable ‘given’. So when we come to ask questions and design our research processes, we unconsciously make assumptions about what is true, normal or ‘right’. We may also tend to unconsciously assume that the ‘system’ is a value-free space in which our learning can take place. But it is not. It is a space that is laden with values and belief systems which are often totally foreign to those with who or about who, we are researching. So how can we approach the complex and contested research (and evaluation) space? What follows from here are some perspectives based on my own experience as a researcher in cross-cultural contexts. These perspectives are of course contestable and are open to challenge.

#### **3.1 Checking our assumptions**

One problem with our culture (whether it is western, Aboriginal, or otherwise) is that we do not see it. As children growing up, our beliefs, values and behaviours are enculturated within the dominant social context in which we find ourselves. We do not see it until such time as it is contrasted with another culture. Our first response when our worldview is challenged, is usually to defend our beliefs, values and behaviours based on what we know to be right and true—the assumptions which we have subconsciously taken on board without question.

#### **3.2 Pulling down the ‘scaffolds’ of our knowledge systems**

Truth, objectivity, rational reasoning and impartiality are research values we often take pride in. Research in higher education institutions is rewarded for the new knowledge and innovation that is



generated. But what would happen if we discovered that there was an alternate knowledge system with different ways of knowing, accompanied by different ways of being? As educators we are taught to use what are commonly and metaphorically called scaffolding techniques—which in broad terms could be thought of in terms of co-construction of knowledge, built largely on the teacher's knowledge but with the active engagement of the learner, consistent with the theoretical perspectives offered by Vygotsky and Piaget. There are of course limitations with the metaphor and there are various interpretations of its meaning and application (Verenikina 2003). Nevertheless, the temptation in research is to believe that we are co-constructing knowledge, building primarily on our own knowledge and skills when in actual fact we are overlaying knowledge from one system to another without regard for the implications.

### **3.3 Being aware of colonising methodologies**

Smith (1999) in her oft quoted book *Decolonizing methodologies* has introduced many a researcher to both the impact of and ways of addressing research methodologies that deny the reality of power relationships between the researcher and the researched, particularly among indigenous peoples of the world. Some may ask 'how could an objective, rigorous and ethical research process do this?'. The development of research methodologies are inevitably built on paradigmatic constructs (for example positivist and post-positivist) which have their origins well and truly rooted in ways of being, doing, believing and being that are quite alien to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of seeing the world. For example, a scientific process that tests an hypothesis is quite alien in a more traditional Aboriginal society. The hard part for cross-cultural researchers is to recognise the limitations of their knowledge system in this context and indeed to 'unlearn' it, so as to learn from, what to them is a completely foreign knowledge system—hard to understand, hard to describe and hard to translate in the dominant worldview narrative (see also Liamputtong 2010). While I speak from a non-Indigenous perspective I have little doubt that a person from a remote Aboriginal community, where English is not spoken (except to interface with the mainstream world) will have exactly the same difficulties at the 'cultural interface' as Nakata (2007) describes it.

### **3.4 Problematising our problems**

Conventional research processes begin by defining a research 'problem'. 'Problem-based research isolates the object of the study from the multiplicity and complexity in which the object of the study is situated... the end result is data that has answers or conclusions for problem solving' (Berry 2006:103). The problem with the problem though is that it is more often than not defined from a dominant culture (or mainstream) perspective. Take for example the 'problems' of teacher retention, student attendance, community engagement, teacher quality, and educational outcomes, to mention just a few, in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Whose problems are these things? Are students who do not attend concerned about their non-attendance? Are community members overly concerned about 'teacher quality' when they have no idea about how the mainstream defines quality? The challenge then for those of us who are working cross-culturally, is to ask the hard questions about what the problem is, whose it is and how the culture in which we find ourselves describes it (if indeed it is a problem). And then we need to listen—carefully.

### **3.5 Reimagining possibilities**

We (from wherever 'we' come) often take the institutional structures, social expectations and political frameworks as 'givens'. For example, for those of us who have grown up with political democracies, it is hard to imagine any other political or governance structures. Similarly for those of us who were educated in schools, with teachers, principals and classrooms it is difficult to imagine an alternative construct within which to place learning. But if we are to use our research to make a difference, it may pay us to reimagine what may be. As noted in the earlier contextual discussion about remote education, the 'system' as it is has a long as well as recent history of failure. Yet we

persist with the system and in the current political environment continue to pour money into a system that fails. How then can we use our research to imagine a different system that might work?

### **3.6 Dealing with complexities**

Complexities are one of the few givens in remote research contexts. The mainstream often looks for simple solutions (like the apparent antidote of ‘every child attending every day so you can get a decent job’). These simple solutions sound good but do they work? I recently reviewed the findings of an evaluation of a mobile preschool program which was designed to improve school-readiness. The data showed that by and large, despite apparently well thought out design and delivery and a decent investment in the program, the program did not work. The researchers had trouble explaining why this should be, given the ‘what works’ literature that showed the importance and value of this kind of intervention in many cultural contexts. There are any number of reasons why the program did not make a difference, but they were probably as much about the assumptions in the research design as they were about the mainstream service delivery in Aboriginal contexts, or the incongruence of a mobile preschool model in an environment where early learning is supported through completely different means. Simple solutions rarely exist in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts.

### **3.7 Seeking alternative ‘standpoints’**

Tur et al (2010) talk about their work as Aboriginal researchers in a variety of scientific and educational contexts, drawing on ‘standpoint theory’. Nakata (2007:11) suggests that: ‘An Indigenous standpoint... has to be produced. It is not a simple reflection of experience and it does not pre-exist in the everyday waiting to be brought to light’. For me as a non-Aboriginal researcher, production of an Indigenous standpoint is impossible. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, the production of community standpoints is not that easy either. It requires ‘critical sensitivity and reciprocity of spirit by the researcher’ (Tur et al. 2010:62). The richness of knowledge created in this way sometimes presents challenges for universities and policy makers, but in order to produce authentic findings that not only reflect the voices of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders but amplify and project those voices into the mainstream, these standpoints are essential. In order for universities and researchers to achieve these authentic outcomes, collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is critical.

## **4. Conclusions**

Those of us who are researchers value the learning we engage in. We value the knowledge that is created through the work we do. For those of us working in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts within Australia, we want to see the work we do produce results that in turn produce changes that make a difference in a field of practice that is contested, complex and problematic. The policy context in which we conduct our research is also contested. Solutions to problems are often articulated in simplistic terms but initiatives particularly in education, have largely failed to make a difference, by anyone’s measure.

How then can we as researchers make a difference? I have argued here that rather than build on our knowledge, we first need to unlearn the assumptions and truths which we bring to our work. We need to pull down the ‘scaffolds’ that frame our knowledge systems. Our methodologies need to recognise the risk of further colonising the research field. Problems need to be re-examined. At the same time, we need to reimagine the possibilities for the systems in which we work. We must avoid treating complex situations simplistically, and in order for our work to be authentic, those of us who are not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, need to collaborate with those who understand the context.

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