Lecture 1: What is education for in a remote school and community?

Abstract

For those who have been through the compulsory education system in Australia and are now training to be teachers, the question of what 'education is for' is seldom asked or answered. A 'good' education, similarly, has some assumed meanings that are rarely unpacked. This lecture takes the 2008 Melbourne Declaration as a starting point for understanding how a good education is expressed in terms of policy, measurement and anticipated outcomes. Broadly, the expectations of the 'system' are focused on academic performance, preparation for further or higher education (retention to year 12), transition to employment or some form of economic engagement, and civic participation. For most students, these assumptions about a good education work well. However, in very remote parts of Australia where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders live, there are repeated calls for improving outcomes. The blame for the apparent failure of remote education is sometimes placed on poor teaching, the quality of teachers, inadequate resourcing, problems with curriculum and often, on problems with the communities. The problems are often described as 'intractable'.

But what do locals living in very remote communities say they want from education? And what do they say it should be for? This lecture will present findings from the CRC for Remote Economic Participation's Remote Education Systems (RES) project. It will explore the foundations of western education in Australia and its intersection (and disconnects) with schooling in remote communities. The aim is to show that the reasons for the 'intractable' nature of the remote education problem has more to do with cultural distance than it does with remoteness.

In the Q&A discussion that follows, participants will have the opportunity to discuss what opportunities there are for delivering a 'good' education (as locals see it) into very remote communities. The implications for school leaders, teachers and teaching practice will be a focus of this discussion. Participants will be provided with pre-reading resources on the topic.

Introduction

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

> *Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence*
>
> *Goal 2: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.* (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008, p. 7)

If we follow the trail from the Melbourne Declaration to where we are now, we see on the one hand a codification of professional standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) and (notwithstanding the recent Review of the Australian Curriculum) a national codification of curriculum (ACARA, 2012b). While there is a good argument for this prescriptive approach in terms of quality assurance, equity and accountability, the system's measures of success have been delimited so that what is measured is tightly focussed on a fairly narrow set of literacy and numeracy knowledges and capabilities, represented in the *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia 2012* (ACARA, 2012a). However, we know (and the Melbourne Declaration confirms it) that education is about more than literacy and numeracy. Philosophically, education has multiple aims and functions and has intrinsic value beyond reading and writing. Yes it is about knowledge and skills, but it is also about values, about socialisation, about citizenship, it prepares young people for a future in work, it is about equity and rights, transformation, and it is also about childhood and adolescent development. More broadly education establishes our place in an ever shrinking world (For a brief introduction to philosophies of education see Bailey, 2010). The purposes of education could be summarised perhaps imperfectly as follows in Figure 1. In broad terms, the drivers of education are framed by the philosophical, sociological, economic and psychological positions or standpoints of the 'system'. Throughout this lecture I use the word 'system' to refer to the established structures that support the provision of education, whether they be through private or public means.

Strategically, these are reflected in the hegemonic structures that define whose knowledge and logic matters, where power and control reside, whose beliefs, norms and values are important and where productivity lies.

Figure 1. Defining a good education
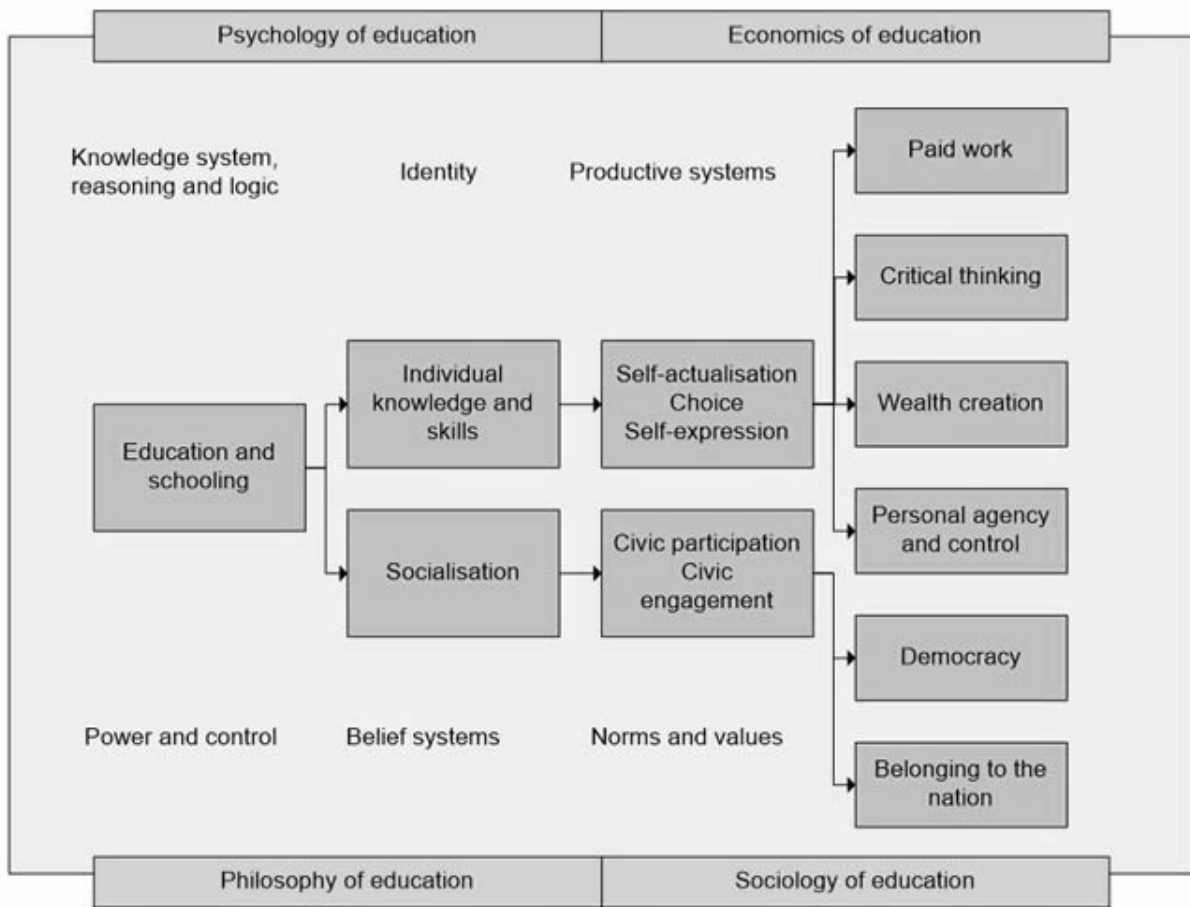
Source: (Guenther et al., 2013)

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

Teachers going to remote communities may not have thought about the 'education, what for?' question, either in their preparation or in their induction. Why? Because it is something we 'just know'. We don't have to think about this. Throughout this lecture, I will refer to remote education with a particular meaning in mind. What I am referring to is education that occurs in one of over one thousand discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (see Figure 2), most of which have population counts of less than 100 and most of which are classified as 'very remote'. There are 274 schools that are classified as 'very remote' and of these 160 have more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

Figure 2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
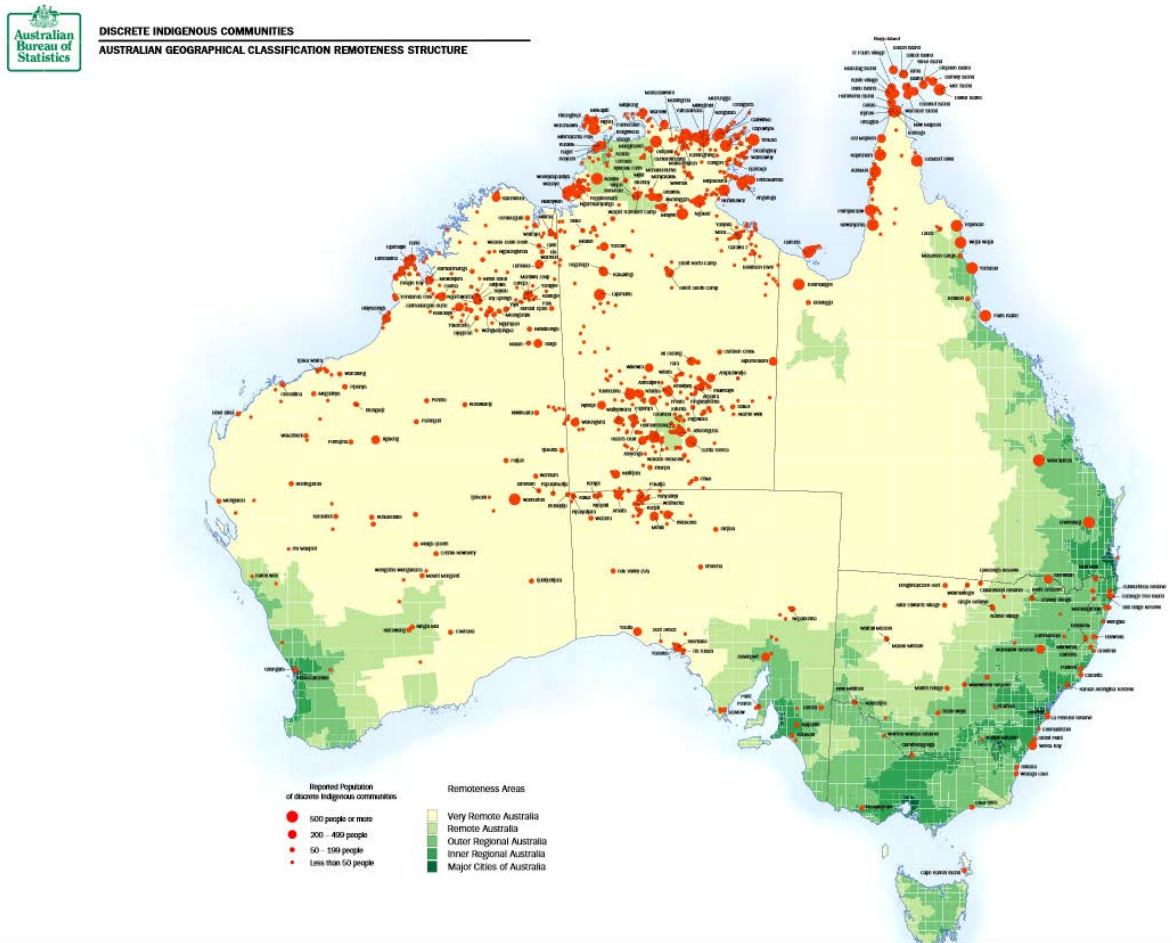
Source: (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007)

The context of remote education

Before I talk about what education may or may not be for in remote communities I cannot assume that the context is understood. A lot of Australians may perhaps have a romanticised view of 'outback' Australia, or could see remote Australia as simply a slightly more geographically isolated part of metropolitan or regional Australia. The major differences though are not about geography or physical distance. The major differences, at least when we consider remote community schools are about cultural distance. Osborne in Lester et al (2013) for example, describes a dynamic that is present in remote schools when he suggests that:

> *this positions schools located in Red Dirt communities as an island of culture, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can feel somewhat alienated despite being so close to home.* (p. 6)

What is education for in a remote community?

I base these comments on findings from the Remote Education Systems project, which over the last three years has been gathering data from a variety of sources including publicly available quantitative data sources such as the 2011 Census and My School data since 2008. Perhaps more important than the quantitative data is the qualitative data, which allows us to interrogate the numerical data with questions of why and how.

Before I talk about that, let me first put a caveat on the use of those quantitative datasets. *Firstly*, the questions that they ask are based on ways of knowing, being, valuing and believing—epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies and cosmologies—that have a western orientation. What this means is that many of the questions that are asked in the Census or in data collected for My School would not be considered important from a remote community perspective. Furthermore, many of the important questions that should or would be asked from a remote community perspective, are not. *Secondly*, some of the assumptions about the meanings of words used to interpret the data (words like success and aspiration) do not necessarily have a correlate in local language. Nevertheless, these data are important as they give us clues about remote education, albeit from a western perspective. When we look at those data uncritically, we can draw conclusions like many others have, that remote students are behind, failing or disadvantaged—and that the deficit is largely due to their Indigenous status or remoteness.

Let me suggest, in the context of a remote community, that it is the non-locals who are disadvantaged. Those, like me, who come into a remote community often have no idea of the local language, the kinship system, the local histories of the place, the local politics or the local culture. We have no idea about what counts as important. What we do see are things that are not normal for us. It could be dogs, rubbish, people apparently sitting around doing little, few local people engaged in paid employment, and often when we visit the school, we hear stories of children not attending or engaging in learning, and stories of children dropping out at the end of primary school. We hear stories of dysfunction, crime, violence, gambling, substance abuse and 'poor health'. All these things blind us to the 'truth' as it is perceived by locals. All this is an aside, but an important one nevertheless.

Thirdly, locals in remote communities are used to non-local researchers coming in and gathering data, doing surveys and writing reports about them. They have learned the art of responding to researchers in such a way that satisfies them—and quickly too—so they can get on with life. So if you ask the question: 'Is education important?' the answer will be 'yes'. The same would apply to a range of questions about attendance, academic achievement, getting a job, having a career or going on to further or higher education. But we know the reality is often different. Let me recount a story from one of my colleagues, Sam Osborne, who conducted a workshop on education in the community of Yuendumu. He describes an interaction he had like this:

> SO: *Do you think education is important for children in Yuendumu?*
>
> Participant: *Yes, very important.*
>
> SO: *Why do you think education is important for children in Yuendumu?*
>
> P: *So they can learn to read and write and be strong in two cultures and get a job.*
>
> SO: *And do you think children should go to school every day?*
>
> P: *Yes*
>
> SO: *Whose responsibility is it for making sure children are at school every day?*
>
> P: *The parents….I think it's the parents*
>
> SO: *What do you think should happen if children aren't attending school?*

> *P: I think maybe the police should go and see the parents or maybe the parents should lose their Centrelink payments.*
>
> *At this point, I stopped the questions so that we could reflect on the interview I had modelled in relation to power-laden research, the nature of research using 'obvious' and closed questions and to reflect on whether the participant had contributed the things they actually believe, or whether they had been complicit in the 'conspiracy'.*
>
> *At this exact moment, a young lad around 14 years old wandered into our workshop room looking very relaxed and comfortable. He was walking from the door and slowly making his way around the table to where I had set up some drinks, fruit and some nuts. Ironically, I recognised this boy from my time working in remote South Australia, some 800km to the south by road. Amazed, I asked, "Shane, what are you doing here?" He motioned towards the woman I had just been interviewing about education and schooling and, with some hesitation, continued to make his way around the table to the other side of the room to survey the offerings of snacks and drinks, without really making significant eye contact with anyone in the room. I focussed my attention on the woman, waiting for her to fill me in, but she did not make eye contact with me or with the boy, apparently oblivious to the exchange that had just taken place. I felt I should "make the links" and explain why I was making a bit of a fuss over this boy. I explained, "I was working in the APY lands earlier in the year and was teaching some choir in the school and that's how I know Shane. What on earth is he doing here in Yuendumu?"*
>
> *At this point, the woman turned towards me and said, "Sam, this is my son Shane. I gave him away as a baby to be raised in South Australia, but now he's come back to get to know the family and I'm looking after him."*
>
> *This, of course, raised some serious opportunities to interrogate the entire interview process that had just taken place, which it must be said, was undertaken very seriously by Shane's mother.* (Osborne, 2014, p. 10)

In case you didn't see it, Shane should have been at school and yet his mother, five minutes earlier was arguing that parents who don't send their children to school, should have their welfare payments removed! The three points I raised in the lead up to this story point to some extent to the perils of non-locals doing research in remote communities. We are conscious of the importance of digging under the surface responses in situations like this. The same should apply to anyone working in a remote community. I have spoken to lots of experts over the years who have the answer to the problem of remote education. Among the reasons most often cited for failure is the quality of teachers. We know that teachers in remote communities tend to be younger and less experienced than other teachers in urban contexts. Does that then mean that an older, more experienced teacher—one who is successful in an urban school—will be any more successful than one fresh out of university? I suspect not.

I now want to turn to the main point of this lecture, which is about what education is for in remote communities and schools. To help answer this question I will draw on some research conducted for our project by Principals Australia Institute 'Dare To Lead' and the Australian Council for Educational Research. Over the last five years Dare To Lead has conducted what they call 'Collegial Snapshots' in schools across Australia. Of these, 31 were conducted in very remote schools with predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We asked them to analyse their data with a view to understanding how locals and non-locals saw education: what were their aspirations for the future, how did they see the experience of school and what did they say 'success' looked like? To some

extent these 'Snapshots' suffer from the same problems I described earlier—they are conducted by non-locals and the data shows some evidence of locals wanting to 'please' the non-local researcher by giving him or her the answer they are looking for. Nevertheless, this data, which captured the views of 672 individuals with over two-thirds being locals, provides some rich insights (See Guenther et al., 2014 for more details).

Firstly, in terms of future orientation, it was locals who saw a greater future arising from education than non-locals. Locals saw school as a pathway into a job or career and also as an opportunity to explore the world beyond their community. Significantly lower proportions of non-locals saw a pathway from school for local students. This suggests that either non-locals themselves cannot see a future for young people beyond school, or perhaps they are so focused on delivering education that the connection to what lies beyond is not something they think about. Either way, it may be reasonable to deduce that the school to work/career pathway is unclear. The other point to note is that overall there were not too many comments in the data about a future orientation. Just 245 comments out of more than 8000 in the data set related to this theme.

Table 1.   Remote schools: future orientations, selected themes (n**=245)

Themes identified	Local stakeholders	Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders	Total	Commentary
Jobs/careers	69*	16	85	About three quarters of these specified a particular job/career aspiration, some of which implied further training/study
Moving to another community	48*	7	55	Most parents commented that their children need to be exposed to other communities (including educational experiences)
Going on to boarding schools/ colleges	15	13	28	Good for some, but homesickness is a significant factor (about half of these respondents)

* Chi-squared test shows a significant difference between local and non-local responses, p<.05, **n represents the number of discrete comments.

In terms of the expectations of the schooling experience there were some quite stark differences. Non-locals were much more focused on academic outcomes and opening up choice and options for students than locals. Locals though, saw their expectations of the school experience in terms of fun/enjoyment (though this was mainly from students) and secondly on learning languages. What this partial list indicates (and there is more in the data than these) is a difference in priorities. In terms of the 'what is education for?' question, it shows that academic outcomes are far less important for locals than non-locals, while learning local language was a far higher priority for locals than non-locals.

Table 2. Remote schools: expectations of schooling, selected themes (n=808)

Themes identified	Local stakeholders	Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders	Total	Commentary
Academic outcomes	46*	130	176	Evident that data tracking is commonly in place; about one quarter of comments from a range of respondents say school has 'high expectations'; about one quarter believe their school does not perform as well as other schools
Fun/enjoyment	82*	26	108	82 comments from students, identifying what made school (and learning) 'enjoyable'; whether or not the teacher was perceived as a 'good teacher'
Choice/options	24*	70	94	Half of these comments from school leaders, mostly indicating that there are flexible approaches according to need
Learning language	65*	17	83	Most comments related to having the students learning more about their local language. i.e.: more opportunities to learn their language in the school

* Chi-squared test shows a significant difference between local and non-local responses, $p<.05$

The final set of data shows perceptions about how success is defined. Here again there are marked and significant differences in views. While locals were most concerned about behaviour management, culture and language, non-locals were predominantly concerned about attendance and then to a lesser extent about behaviour and then health and well-being. Again, the data points to a difference in priorities. In terms of the 'education, what for?' question, again we see a focus by locals on local language and also culture.

Table 3. Remote schools: Aspects of success, selected themes (n=1065)

Themes identified	Local stakeholders	Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders	Total	Commentary
Behaviour/ behaviour management	165*	76	241	High levels of awareness that 'policies' are in place; many students and parents comment that the school shows fairness when dealing with incidents and issues
Attendance	39*	172	211	Overall, this is seen as an area of improvement; factors include family and cultural responsibilities (8), disengagement in class (35)
Culture	66*	52	118	20 comments from AEWs about the need for better cultural awareness/understanding by new staff
Language	66*	20	86	Most commented positively about current home language programs in the school, or the need for one; 12 from AEWs about the need to 'save language'
Health and well-being	16*	66	82	The majority of comments illustrated that health programs such as Breakfast Clubs were good for learners.

* Chi-squared test shows a significant difference between local and non-local responses, $p<.05$

Wherever we go, we hear stories that resonate with the kinds of findings presented here. At the 2014 Garma festival a local educator from Lajamanu, Valerie Patterson commented:

> *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. Many international and Australian reports show that it is important for children to learn in their first language. We have seen with our own eyes the benefits of teaching young children to speak, sing, read and write in their mother tongue, Warlpiri, first before moving on to do the same in English. Our children can learn strong Warlpiri and strong English. That is why we need strong programs and expert teachers, both Warlpiri teachers and teachers of English as a second language. When children learn their language at school in strong programs, we see better attendance. We want better attendance—but not just attendance. We want our kids to come to school for strong learning. We believe that as Indigenous people we have the right to make decisions about our children's education. We have this right under Section 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.* (see text in Minutjukur et al., Forthcoming)

The point that Valerie makes here is profound. She argues that it is their right to have children learn in their own language. She argues that attendance is important, but not at the expense of losing culture and language. So what is education for? It is first and foremost about maintaining a local

identity, and second about being able to engage with the outside world. Anangu educator, Katrina Tjitayi (Lester et al., 2013) talks about confidence too:

> *Children learn well when people continually talk to them. The words that are spoken are received by the child's spirit when they are spoken gently and with patience. It is this spirit that gives the child confidence. The learning enters into his spirit and remains with him. It is not on paper, but in his spirit.* (p. 11)

> *Teaching in our own language, teaching Anangu culture and teaching the children to read and write in Pitjantjatjara / Yankunytjatjara will also open up their spirits (down deep in their roots) because this will give them the courage to try new things for themselves. It will help their confidence also when they have someone close by and continually supporting them.* (p.12)

These short examples back up the data in the previous tables. A 'good' education has a different purpose, a different foundation and different outcomes in remote communities. How then can a non-local teacher come into a remote community school and deliver a 'good education'?

Is it possible to provide a 'good' education in remote community schools?

My colleague, Sam Osborne and I went to Docker River earlier this year to conduct a workshop for the Docker River campus of the Nyangatjatjara College. Part of the purpose of this workshop was to engage with the community so we could determine what they saw as being an advantageous education. About 50 adults from the community of 200 participated. Here are some of things they said they would like to see in an 'excellent teacher'.

> *They need to talk in encouraging ways; the way they use their voice in encouraging is important.*

> *They need to be following through with families; this means when things are good, but also when they don't attend, for example.*

> *The teachers can encourage the kids by putting good things on and constantly encouraging the kids to be involved.*

> *My daughter went to Brisbane on a school trip (and this is very encouraging; more of this is great).*

> *Teachers need to be persistent; they need to give kids a chance and don't give up.*

> *Teachers need to take their work seriously and whole-heartedly*

> *Some kids need to be pushed and not given too easy work – some kids say the work is too easy.*

> *Teachers need to be committed and reflective in their work – really think about what is happening in the classroom.*

What is interesting is that none of these attributes requires a Masters qualification, Doctorate or national accreditation scheme, contrary to the calls of many experts on Indigenous education who argue for quality teaching and quality teachers. In general, all of these 'experts' would point to improved academic outcomes as the key indicator of quality:

> *…quality teaching is the silver bullet.* (Penfold, 2014)

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

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

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

None of this should suggest that quality teaching or quality teachers are not important. However, if we are to take seriously the standpoints of those who live in remote communities we should expect to see a different set of qualities of teachers in the classroom (and community) and a different set of outcomes resulting from teaching. The RES project findings should also not be taken as an excuse to abandon NAPLAN tests or not to take seriously the importance of being numerate and literate in English. As our data shows, English literacy and numeracy are priorities for local people living in remote communities—but they are not as high on the list of priorities as the system wants them to be.

In response then, to the question 'Is it possible to provide a 'good' education in remote community schools?', the answer is emphatically, 'Yes'. However, it would be an interesting exercise to reconfigure the diagram shown at Figure 1 for a remote community. We have baulked at doing this though, as it is impossible to treat communities as an homogenous group. However, in the right hand column we would expect to see items clustered around concepts such as:

- Belonging to country;
- Connection to 'Dreaming', Law, Language;
- Caring for family;
- Confidence and strong in spirit; and
- Capacity to engage and negotiate with the world beyond the community.

The drivers of these endpoints would undoubtedly be underpinned not by western philosophy, psychology, economy or sociology. Rather, we would expect to see a different set of foundations as local expressions of ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and cosmologies. There is an increasing body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic work which points to these positions and outcomes (Arbon, 2008; Ford, 2010; Nakata, 2008, 2012; Sarra, 2011), not to mention educators (Burton & Osborne, 2014; Lester et al., 2013; Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014; Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu et al., 2008; Tjitayi & Osborne, 2014).

Conclusion: An end to intractability

Given the foregoing, we could ask 'where is the problem in remote education?'. There most certainly is a problem for the system, which sees delivery of education as expensive and not achieving what it is designed to. There is also a problem for many in remote communities which are sometimes blamed for the problem not of their own making. Further, their problem is often that the system which delivers education does not deliver what they need or want. It could be argued that students do not have a problem with education. When they have had enough, they simply vote with their feet and avoid it. The reason for the 'intractable problem' then is that (in general) none of the key stakeholders are happy with what is on offer. The end to intractability could be quite simple.

First, the system could start offering what remote community leaders want in response to what education is actually for. A key consideration here is the provision of an education that supports local languages and cultures and local expectations of choice through a mix of community-based and boarding options.

Second, the system could probably avoid unnecessary compliance costs by making schooling voluntary. The real test of the success of this approach would be the extent to which students, who are voluntarily opting out—regardless of compliance pressures—opt in.

Third, the focus on teacher quality and teaching quality should shift to one that connects the qualities of the prospective remote teacher (whether they be a graduate or more experienced teacher) with what is required to work effectively in communities. There are examples of pre-service and post-graduate programs that already do this quite well. The outcomes expected of quality remote community school teachers will inevitably be different than what may be expected in an urban school.

We would anticipate that an education that has purpose and meaning for remote students will be attractive—like it is for most students in non-remote communities.

Suggested pre-readings

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

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Some questions for discussion

1. How does or should a university School of Education best prepare people for work in a remote school?
2. Can the qualities required of remote educators be taught or learned?
3. With the demands of the systems on teachers to ensure that literacy and numeracy are priorities, is it still possible for teachers to do education justice in remote communities?
4. How can non-locals think critically about their own ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and cosmologies?

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