Successful remote schools: what are they?

Lecture Number 5 in a series presented by John Guenther of the Remote Education Systems project within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Education

29 July, University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome

Abstract

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

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

But let's take a step back for a moment. Just what is success? And what does it look like in the minds of remote education stakeholders? This lecture responds to these basic questions in the light of findings from the Cooperative Research Centre's Remote Education Systems project, which has engaged over 1000 remote education stakeholders over the last four years. It turns out that success isn't what we might think it is. It isn't about year 12 completion, quality teachers, going on to university and it certainly isn't about NAPLAN scores. Rather, success in the eyes of remote education stakeholders—and more particularly, remote Aboriginal community members—is about parent and community involvement in schools. It's about community engagement. And while academic outcomes are important for remote stakeholders, to a large extent this just means being able to read, write and count. These findings explain to some extent why the magic bullets and quick fixes haven't worked.

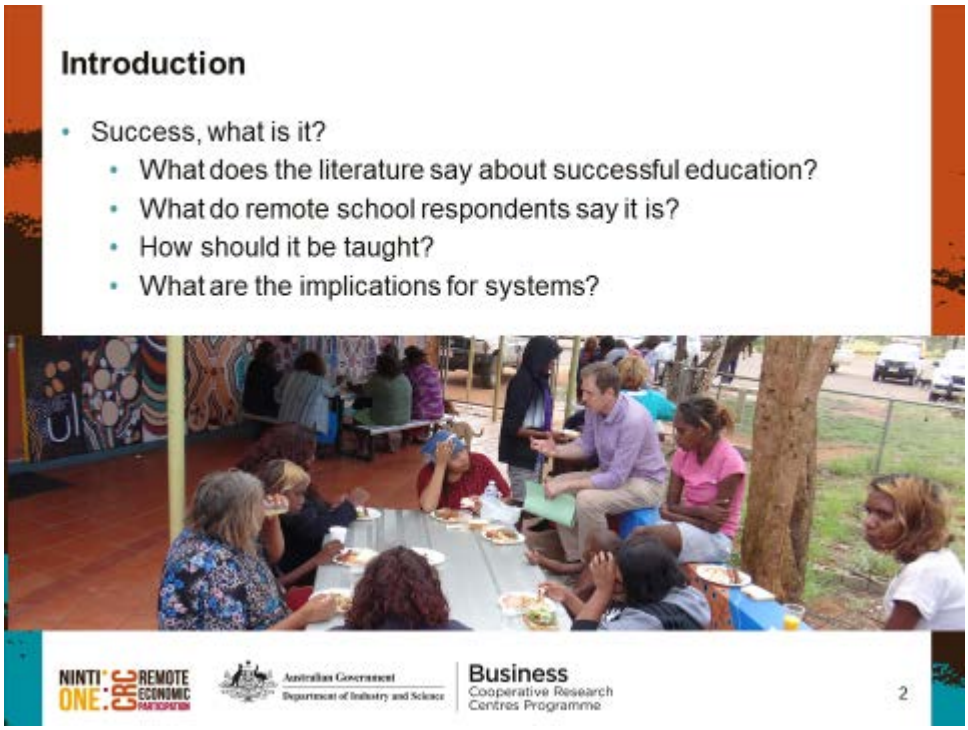
The lecture concludes with some suggestions, based on the research data, about how schools and systems can best respond to community perceptions of success. There will be time for questions and answers following the lecture.

Bio

John Guenther is the Principal Research Leader for the Remote Education Systems project with the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation and Flinders University. John has worked as a researcher and evaluator in remote Australian contexts—particularly the Northern Territory—for the last 12 years on issues related to education, training, families and children, justice, child protection and domestic violence. His current role is focused on understanding how education systems can better respond to the needs of students and families living in very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Introduction

The aim of this lecture is to present findings from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems (RES) project, the fifth in a series of ten. The RES project was designed to uncover ways that could contribute to improving outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. The project team gathered data over three years from school, community, university, and government stakeholders. I acknowledge the work of my colleagues, Sam Osborne and Samantha Disbray, and early on in the project, Melodie Bat. When I talk about 'we' in this lecture, I acknowledge the team's contribution to our work.



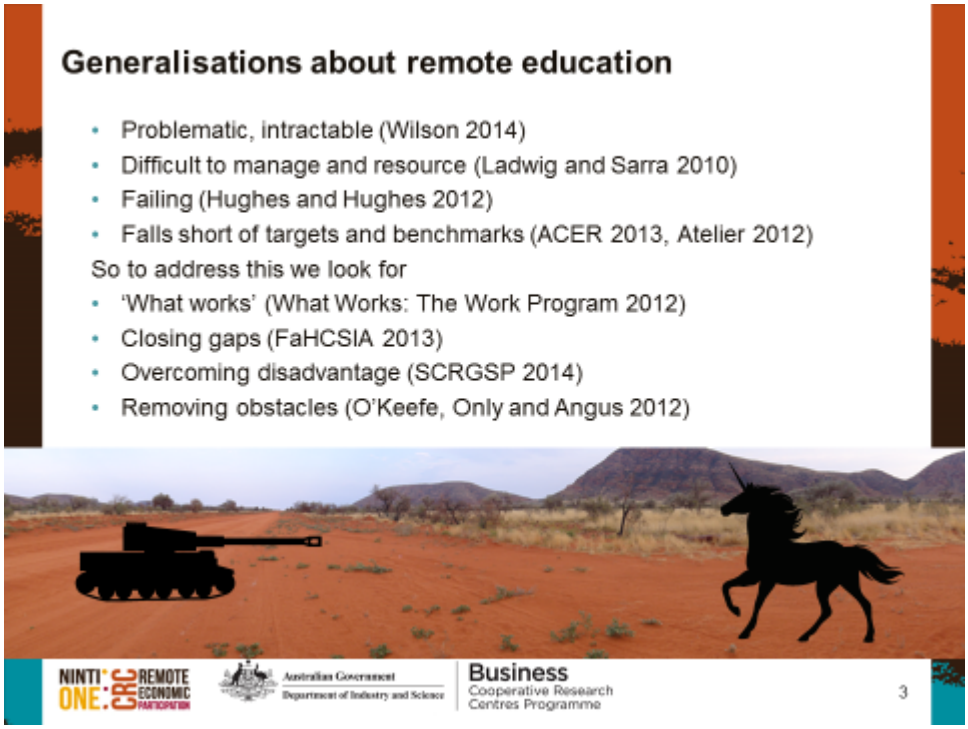
One of our major concerns was to understand what Aboriginal people from remote communities thought about success and how to achieve it. While we are also interested in the views of Torres Strait Islanders, because our work was mainly focused on the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia, we acknowledge that their views are not represented in the data I present here.

We did seek the views of non-remote stakeholders as well. Our data therefore allows us to compare the remote perspective with those of others. However, our primary concern is to ensure that the voices of those who live in or belong in remote communities, are given priority.

The literature, which I will turn to directly, generally describes success from western and non-remote perspectives. It often treats the concept as a given with little critique or consideration of how a notion of success in education is conceptualised and expressed in multilingual remote communities across Australia.

A version of this lecture is scheduled to be published in the Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, later this year.

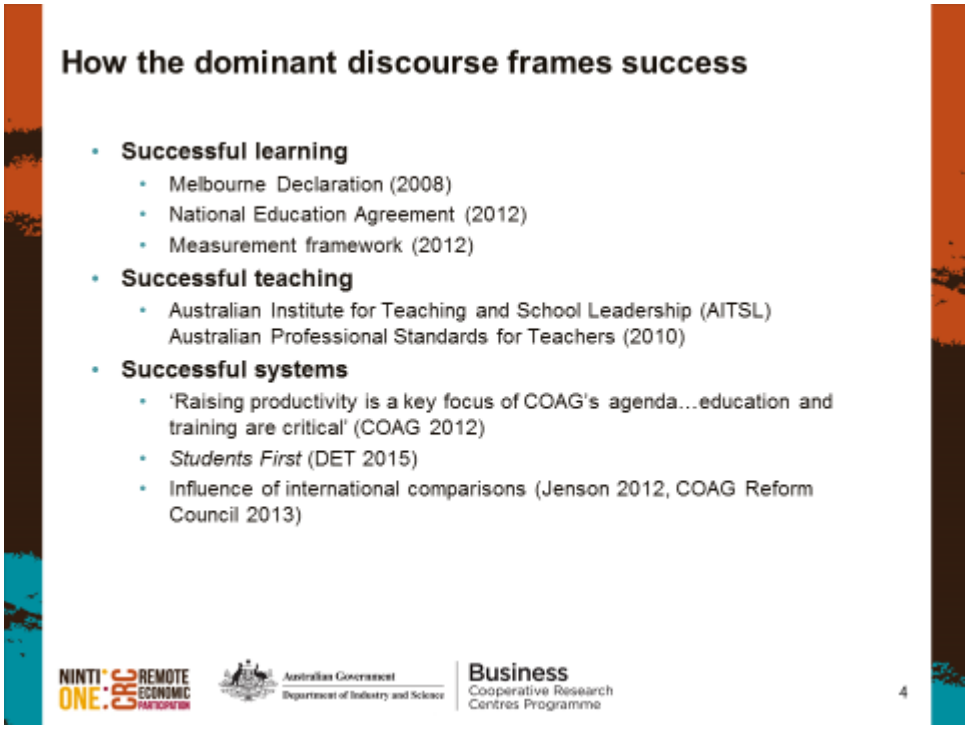
Education for very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities



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

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

How the dominant discourse frames success



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

Successful learning

To a large extent 'success' defined by education systems, depends on perceptions of what education is for. In 2013 we problematized this within the context of remote education in Australia (Guenther and Bat 2013). If, as we argued then (see also Guenther, Bat et al. 2013)—that in Australia at least—a good education leads to economic participation and wealth, capacity to think, individual agency and control, democratic participation and a sense of belonging, then those are the things that we should count as success. The 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education 2008) concurs with these aims, suggesting that successful learners: develop their capacity to learn; have essential skills in literacy and numeracy; are able to think deeply and logically; are creative and innovative; can make sense of the world; and are on a pathway to 'continued success in further education, training or employment' (p. 8). The *Melbourne Declaration* has resulted in a series of actions that are designed to achieve those (among

other) ends. One of the actions that followed was a *Measurement Framework* (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2012) which attempts to set out how educational outcomes should be measured according to the *National Education Agreement* (Standing Council on Federal Financial Relations 2012). In the end, the Measurement Framework identified four indicator areas: participation; achievement in the National Assessment Program; attainment; and equity. The array of indictors for these outcome areas is largely based on test scores, attendance rates, and apparent retention rates along with participation in training or employment. Interestingly the framework doesn't measure equitable education, it measures equity groups, supposedly as a proxy.

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

Successful teaching

A successful education involves successful teaching as well as learning. In Australia, following on from the *Melbourne Declaration's* 'Commitment to Action' a number of initiatives were put in place to improve teacher quality. The National Education Agreement (Standing Council on Federal Financial Relations 2012) specifically committed policy directions toward 'improving teacher and school leader quality' (p. 11). In 2010, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was formed to promote teacher quality through initial teacher education, better school leadership and support for teachers to maximise their impact on student learning. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2011, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2012) were subsequently developed. According to this framework, successful teachers are those that: know their students; know the content and how to teach it; plan and implement effective teaching and learning; create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments; assess, provide feedback and report on student learning; engage in professional learning; and engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community. There are lots of other standards and frameworks that codify quality teaching, but I won't bore you here with the details.

The point of this discussion is to highlight the significance of standards in Australia, as the determining foundation of teacher/teaching quality and its assessment/measurement. We recognise that quality teaching and quality teachers are determined by a number of factors and could be characterised in ways that go beyond the *Professional Standards*. While national standards are important, our intent in uncovering what success looks like in remote schools, is to understand what qualitative differences are required for teachers who teach students from remote communities.

Successful systems

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

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

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

> *Effective parent and family engagement in education is more than just participation in school meetings and helping with fundraising, it is actively*

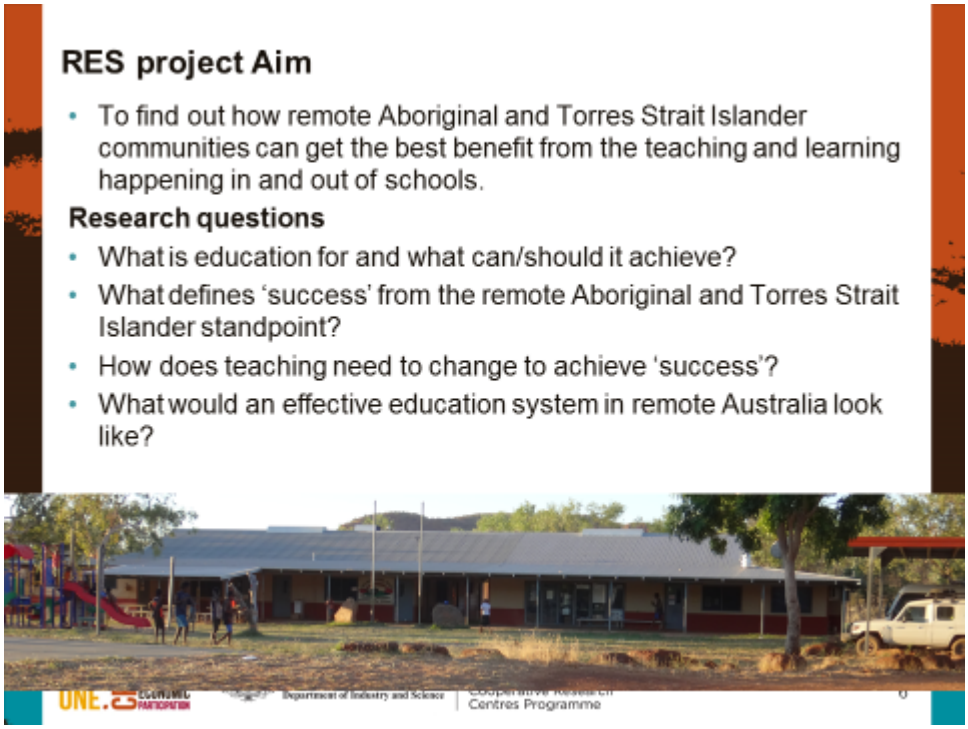
> *engaging with your child's learning, both at home and at school.* (Department of Education and Training 2015)

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

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

Methods

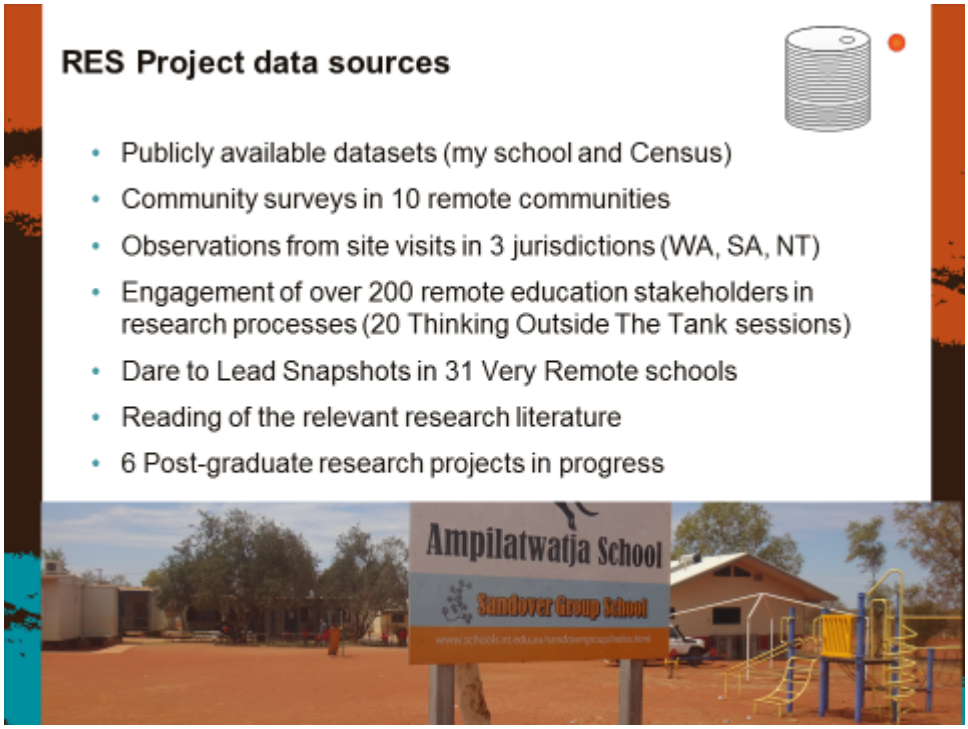
The data I will present here comes from three years of qualitative data gathering from educational stakeholders in very remote Australia. Our research questions drove the direction of our data collection.



I should also point out that while overall, our research is concerned about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints (from remote communities), the data I will present about success comes mainly from non-remote stakeholders, some of who were also either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders.

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?



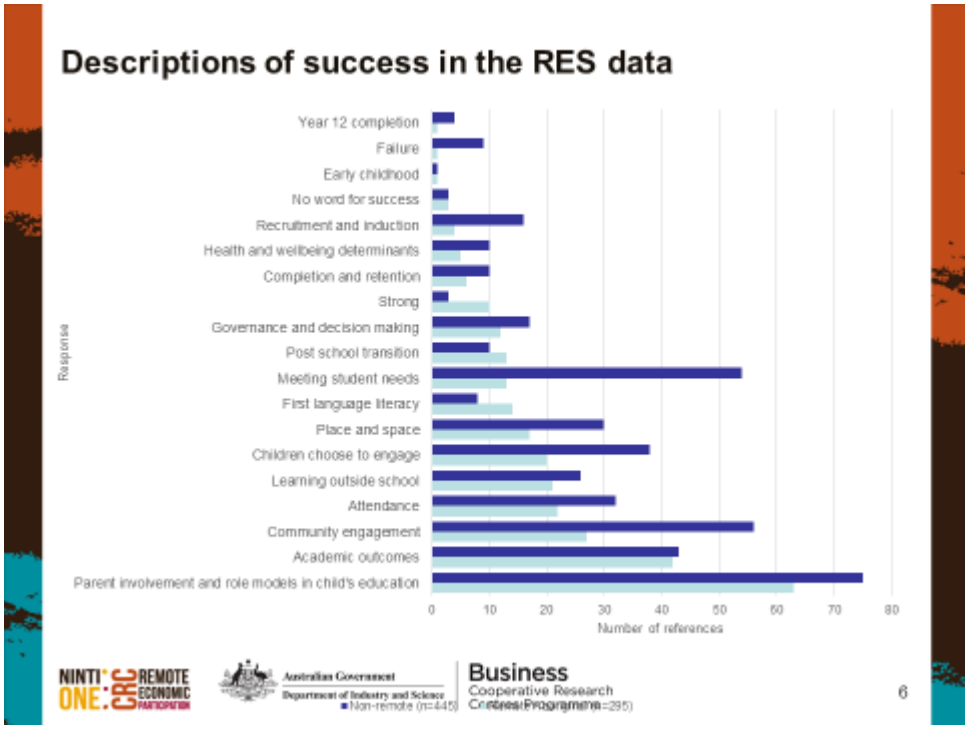
Our research draws on both qualitative and quantitative sources. These include:

- Publicly available datasets (my school and Census);
- Community surveys in 10 remote communities;
- Observations from site visits in 3 jurisdictions (WA, SA, NT);
- Engagement of over 200 remote education stakeholders in formal qualitative research processes (20 Thinking Outside The Tank sessions);
- Dare to Lead Snapshots in 31 Very Remote schools ; and
- Reading of the relevant research literature
- 6 post-grad research projects covering topics related to boarding schools, technology, SACE completions, culturally inclusive curriculum, school readiness and health and wellbeing.

The qualitative data I refer to in this lecture comes from community surveys, observations, thinking outside the tank sessions, interviews and *Dare To Lead* Collegial Snapshots.

In analysing our data, we are of course subject to our own biases, which I acknowledge. The RES team analysed the data together through a process of critical interpretation.

So what does success look like from the perspectives of remote schools and communities?



The first graph here summarises findings from RES qualitative sources.

The largest number of responses were coded at '**parent involvement and role models in child's education'**. Respondents talked about parents encouraging their children, acting as role models, building aspiration for their children, being involved at school, and supporting their children at a number of levels. In some cases the role models described were extended family members or significant others in the community, who led the way for students. This reminds me of the work conducted by the Nulungu Research Institute which resulted in the report *You Can't Be What You Can't See* (Kinnane, Wilks et al. 2014).

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

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

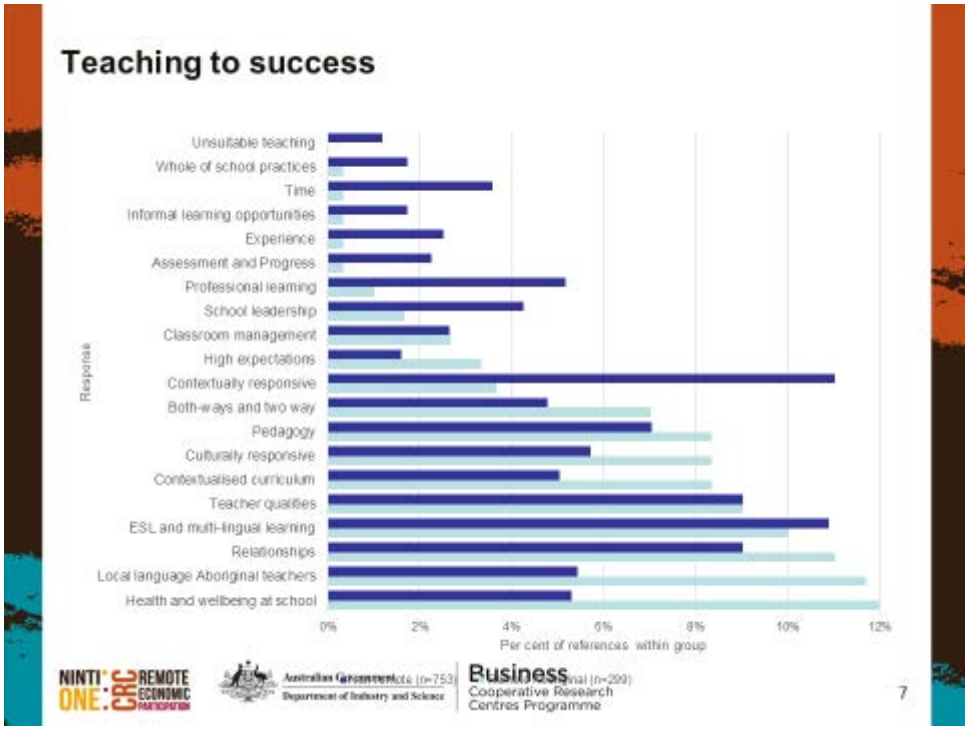
The third indicator of success was described in terms of **community engagement**. Respondents articulated this as consultation, community involvement, school community partnerships, good communication between schools and communities, and bringing expertise from the community into the school. In brief,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

process: school working with and supporting the community, and community working with and supporting the school.

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

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

Teaching to success



The next graph shows how teaching should respond to ideas of success offered in the previous slide. He graph shows how remote Aboriginal responses were much stronger for comments about '**health and wellbeing**' and '**local language teachers**' and a '**contextualised curriculum**'.

Non-remote responses by contrast, were stronger for comments about 'contextually responsive' teaching and for a range of other strategies, which included 'ESL and multilingual learning, 'professional learning', 'assessment and progress' measures, the importance of 'experience', the need for 'informal learning opportunities' and the need to allow for 'time'.

Comments about **health and wellbeing** at school were discussed in terms of children's wellbeing at school as a priority, teasing, safety, school as a safe place, hearing, mental health, resilience, personal hygiene, healthy food, and showing respect. The intent of these comments is not to prescribe these as having to be 'taught', but rather taken into account by schools and teachers. Respondents talked about the need for schools to ensure that student wellbeing was a foundationally important consideration for effective teaching and learning to take place.

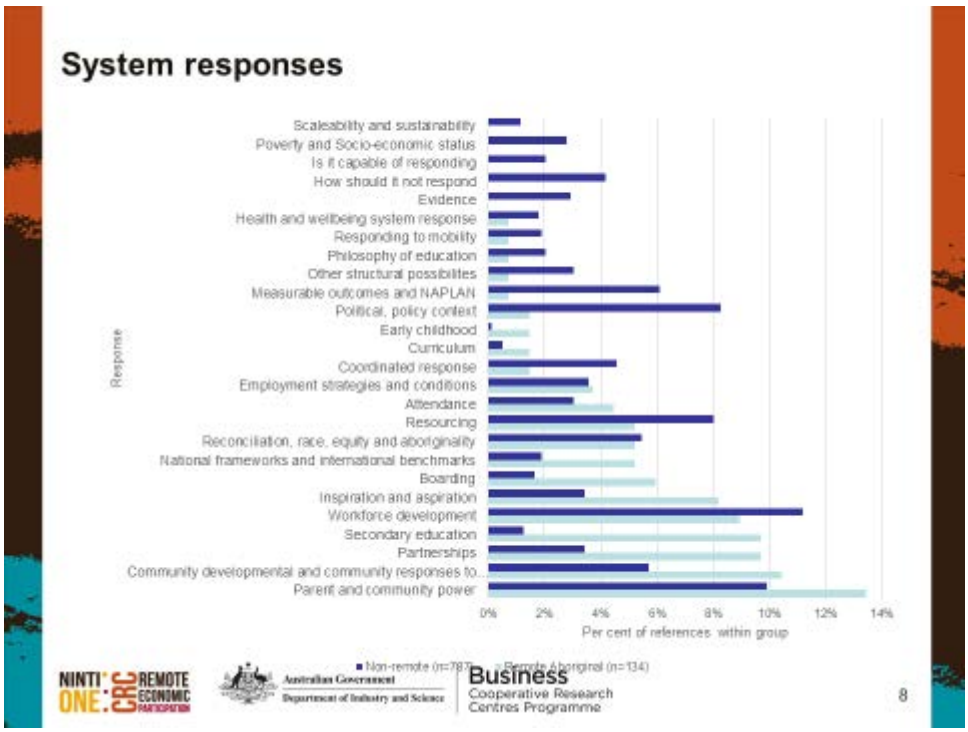
The discussion about the importance of '**local language Aboriginal teachers**' focused on their role as brokers and mediators of local knowledge, being an integral part of 'two way' learning, being actively engaged in what happens in classrooms, teaching in local languages, and working with staff to ensure student wellbeing and safety.

Respondents discussed the importance of **relationships** at a number of levels. Many respondents saw constructive relationships between teachers and assistants, teachers and students, school and community, teachers and parents as critical to successful teaching. The importance of teachers being part of the community was also emphasised as a prerequisite for effective teaching.

Overall, respondents raised **ESL (English as a second language) and multilingual learning** as the most important consideration for successful teaching. They articulated this in terms of bilingual programs, teacher first and second language skills, teacher awareness of language, and teaching in first language (among other related themes).

Respondents generally, were also concerned about teacher qualities. Note that this was not about teacher quality as discussed earlier in the literature. Rather it was about a range of qualities that teachers need to have to work effectively in a remote school context. They included flexibility, being friendly, kind, the teacher as a learner, being prepared for the environment, being respectful, patient, listening, passionate, having commitment, and being dedicated to doing the best for the kids.

A successful remote education system?



The next graph lists the responses in relation to the research question about an effective remote education system. Note that the number of responses from remote Aboriginal participants is much smaller (134) than for those from non-remote respondents (787). Bearing this in mind, the top five themes at the bottom of the figure represent more than half of all remote Aboriginal responses.

Under '**parent and community power**' respondents discussed building relationships with community, community (including school) empowerment, supporting community engagement,

parental responsibility, local autonomy, giving parents real choices, and parents participating in planning.

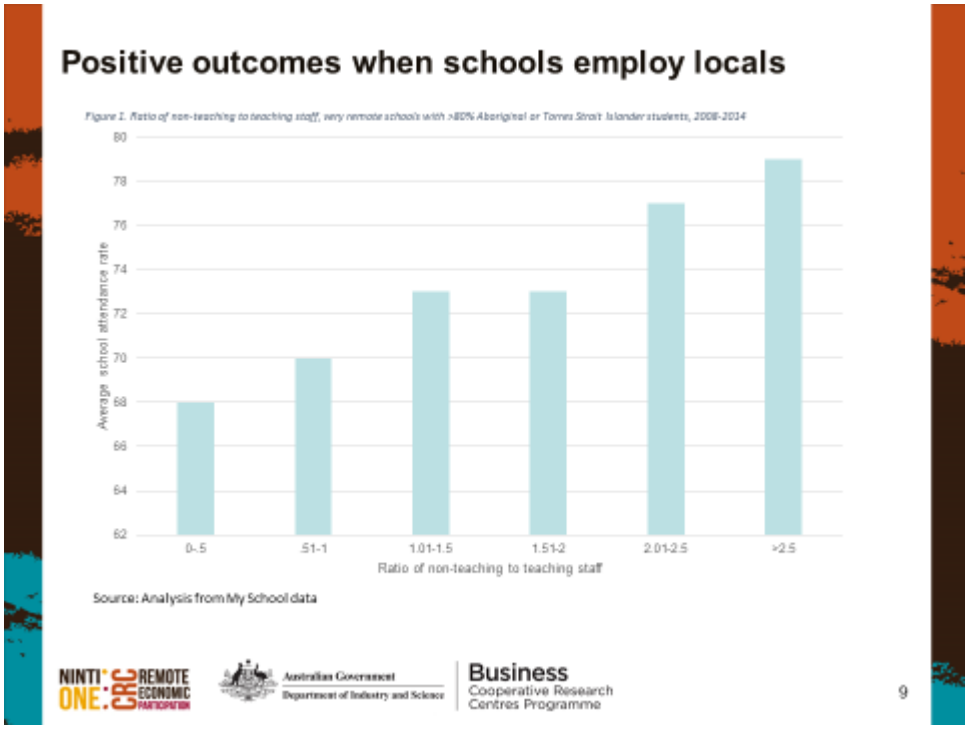
The theme '**community developmental and community responses to success**' was conceptually connected to 'parent and community power'. There were important distinctions though. Community and developmental approaches included those that recognised community expectations, were empowering, built a shared language, used developmental approaches, which recognised the incongruence in values between community and the 'system'.

The theme of **'partnerships'** is also connected to the previous themes. Remote Aboriginal respondents described ways of working together, both within communities and with organisations from outside. They described the need for collaboration, consultation and partnerships for good governance.

Remote Aboriginal respondents had mixed views about '**secondary education**'. Some saw the value of boarding schools as an option. However, more respondents talked about the importance of having local secondary options for young people. They did not provide a lot of detail about this, but some talked about the need for separate spaces for high school aged students and the need for vocational and other training options as part of secondary provision.

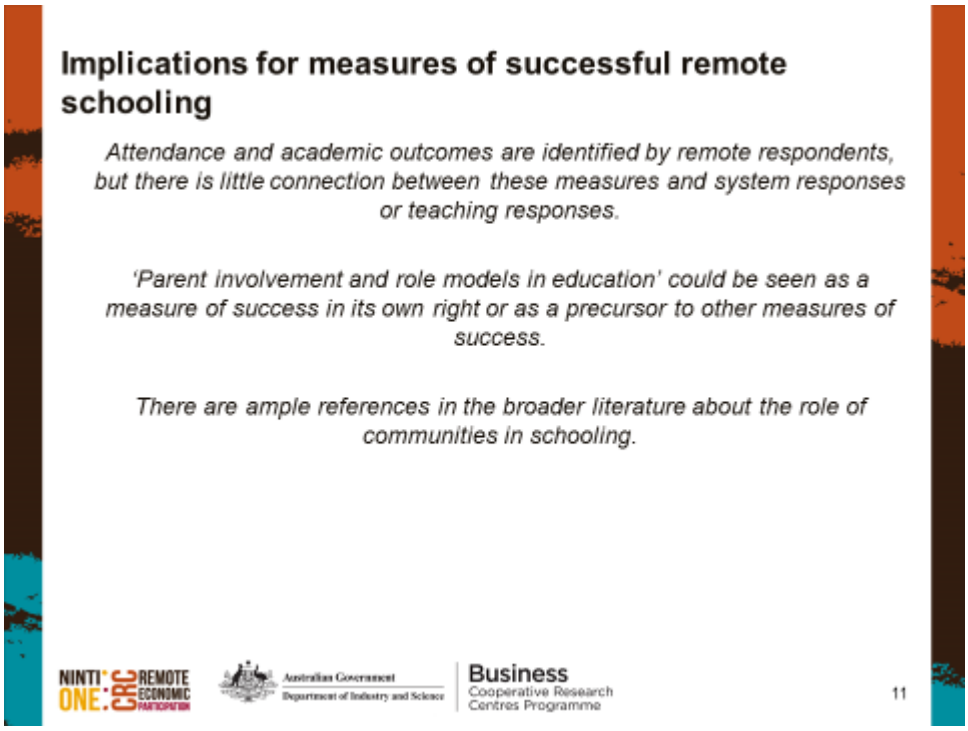
Workforce development was the strongest theme when remote Aboriginal and non-remote responses were combined. Remote Aboriginal respondents talked about the need to recruit, train and support local people who could teach in local languages. Some talked about the need to engage community leaders in recruitment processes and more generally to find ways of working collaboratively together.

As an aside, these qualitative findings are consistent with our quantitative analysis of My School data, which shows that the higher the ratio of non-teaching to teaching staff, the higher the attendance rate in very remote schools. Together, these data provide a powerful rationale for workforce development strategies that target recruitment of local staff.



However, the bulk of responses under this theme came from non-remote stakeholders. For these respondents the issues were about undergraduate teacher programs, recruitment, orientation, professional learning, and ongoing support. They were concerned about induction processes, mentoring, dealing with staff turnover and having to 'renew knowledge'.

Implications for measures of successful remote schooling

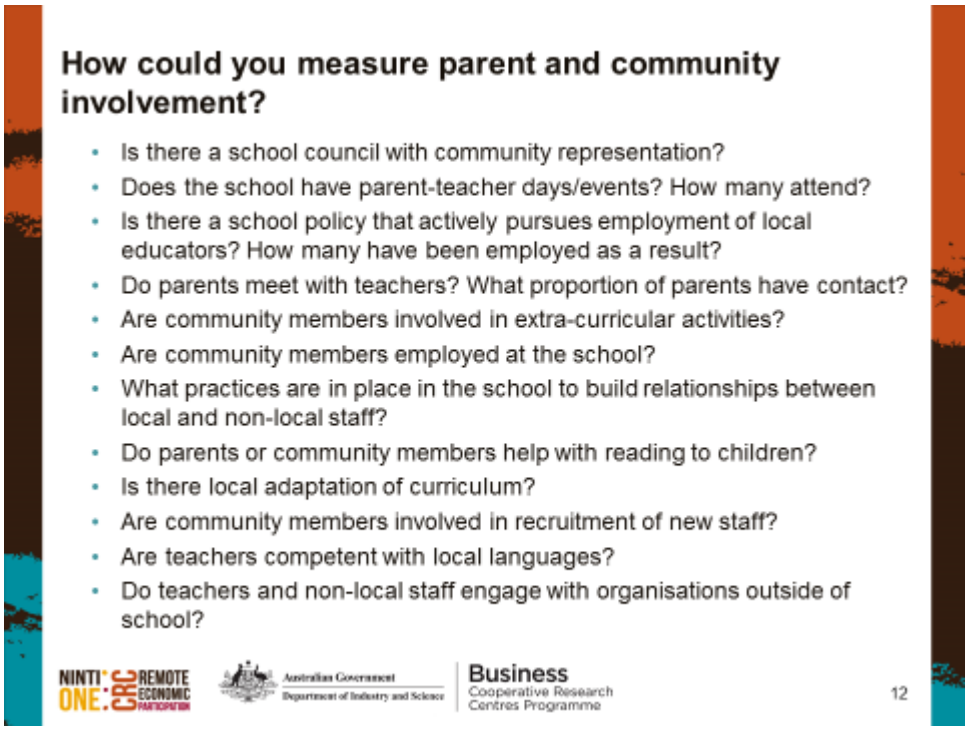


What might this all mean then if we were to offer an alternative metric for the measurement of success in remote schools? The data presented here points to indicators of success that go well beyond those described in the literature I discussed earlier. There is little congruence between the measures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

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

There are ample references in the broader literature about the role of communities in schooling. The now superseded Parent and Community Engagement (PaCE) program is premised on the assumption that community engagement is important for educational outcomes. Our analysis of data from the

Australian Census and publicly available school data from the *My School* website (ACARA 2015) suggests that community factors contribute to school (academic) outcomes as much or more than school-based factors (Guenther, Disbray et al. 2014). Our qualitative research focusing on the role of schools and families in schools supports this assertion (Guenther 2014).

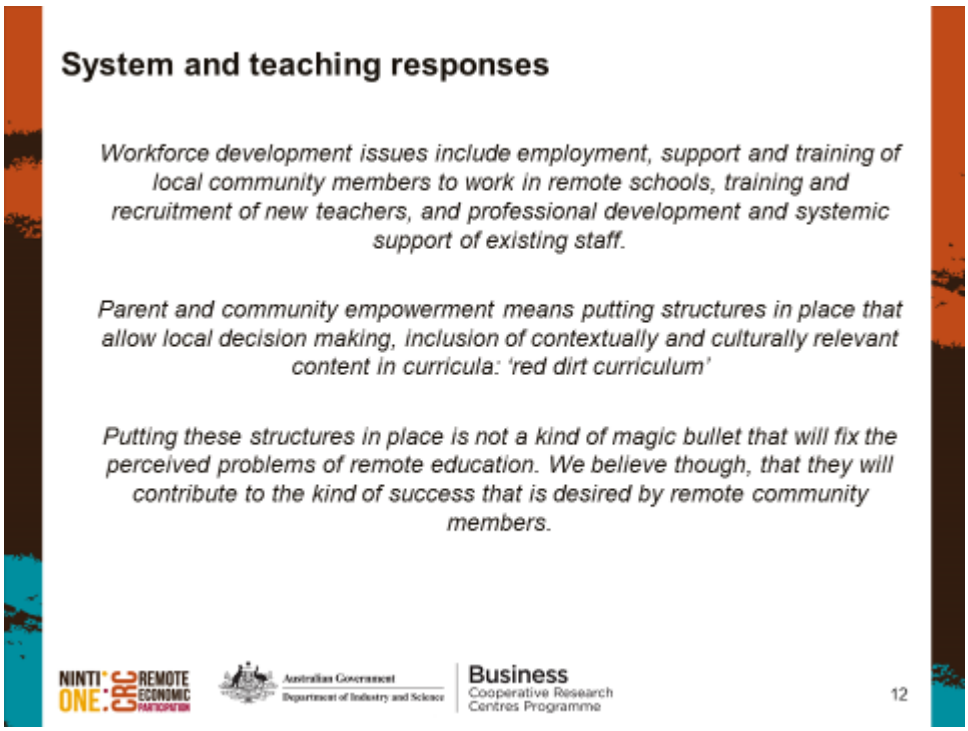


Some might suggest that parental involvement and community engagement are largely qualitative aspects of a community or school's activities. How then could schools measure parental involvement and community engagement? We would like to suggest a number of quantitative indicators that point to success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

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

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

System and teaching responses



It is one thing to recognise a set of indicators that measure an alternative conception of success. It is another to promote an appropriate system response to achieve outcomes that are consistent with those measures. The RES data points to system responses that do just that.

Our data points to two major system responses. The **first involves processes that empower communities and parents**. The **second involves workforce development strategies**. Workforce development issues are to a large extent reflected in some of the indicators discussed above. They include employment, support and training of local community members to work in remote schools. They also include training and recruitment of new teachers, and professional development and systemic support of existing staff. They include the adoption and implementation of strategies that work towards local workforce development.

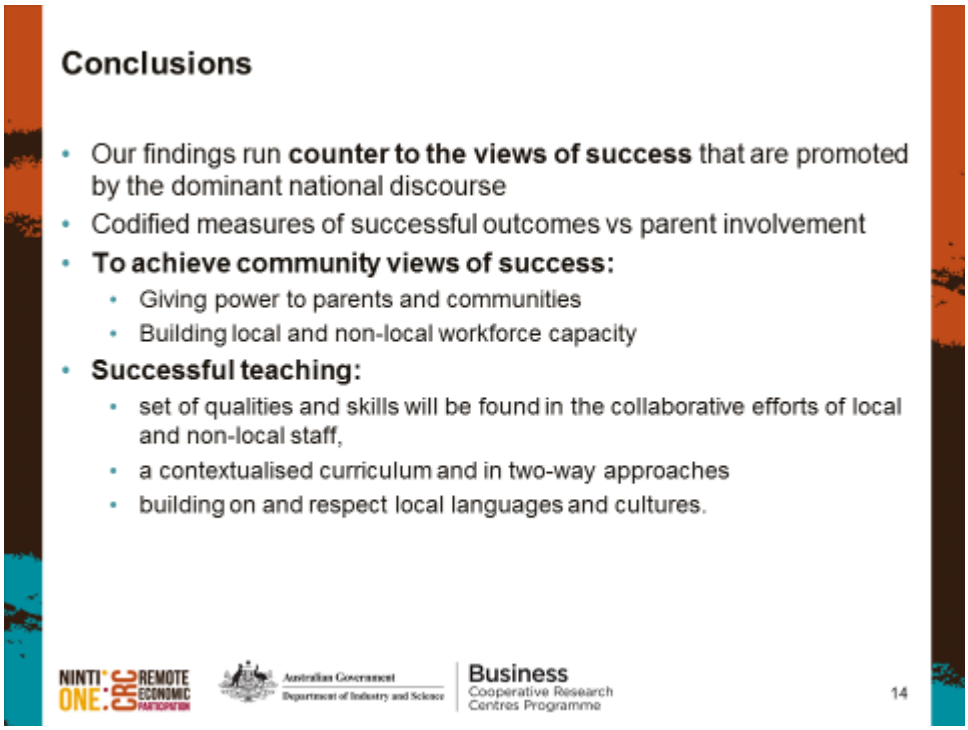
Parent and community empowerment means putting structures in place that allow local decision making, inclusion of contextually and culturally relevant content in curricula, which we have previously referred to as 'red dirt curriculum' (Osborne, Lester et al. 2013). It also means putting systems and structures in place that contribute to local school governance.

We would stress that putting these structures in place is not a kind of magic bullet that will fix the perceived problems of remote education. We believe though, that they will contribute to the kind of success that is desired by remote community members as these types of approaches begin to close the epistemic divide that exists in the remote schooling context by engaging family members (the objects of remote young people's aspiration), elders (the 'knowers' in the local knowledge context) and stakeholders in local schools. They will lead to a more sustainable education in remote schools

as communities are far more likely to strongly contribute to an approach that better represents local needs and aspirations, rather than resisting, even ignoring efforts that are locally perceived as being of little relevance to Indigenous lives. We would therefore anticipate that approaches that work to give power to families and communities, and which build local capacity in the remote community school workforce, will lead to outcomes that will be desirable for the broader education system, not just the remote education system (if there is such a thing).

Successful teaching, according to the views of our respondents, demands an approach that takes into account the health, wellbeing and safety of students, it is contextually responsive and it works to support constructive relationships with staff, parents, community members and students. Successful teaching is also supported by culturally responsive and two-way teaching and learning strategies. It is built on a foundation of qualified ESL teachers with qualities that fit the remote context, and local language educators. These characteristics of successful teaching and teachers should not be seen as a counter to the Australian Professional Teaching Standards. Rather, they should be seen as additional requirements that are not covered in the Standards, except in a general way. For example, the Standard that calls for teachers to know their students is applicable but knowing students in a remote community requires a lot more from teachers than it would where teachers and students come from similar cultures. This is why it is so important for schools to engage local staff. They are the community. They know their students.

Conclusions



Data from the Remote Education Systems project presented here, points to findings that run counter to the Australian rhetoric about what educational success means. The formula for success described in the literature, involves meeting the codified requirements of standards and achievement of prescribed standards of academic performance. The picture painted in the data presented here is somewhat different.

The picture of success offered through data obtained from those from remote communities, sees parent involvement as the primary indicator. It sees community engagement as another important

measure. To achieve these measures, respondents argued for a systems approach that gives power to parents and communities and which builds local and non-local workforce capacity in order to deliver a more contextually and culturally responsive education. Successful teaching to achieve these ends requires a set of qualities and skills that may not be found in Professional Standards. Successful teaching will however be found in the collaborative efforts of local and non-local staff, in a contextualised curriculum and in two-way approaches that build on and respect local languages and cultures.

The picture of success presented here is not intended to offer a quick fix for remote education. To achieve the measures of success identified here will take a sustained and well-resourced effort.

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