Culturally and contextually responsive schools: what are they and why do they matter?

Lecture Number 7 in a series presented by John Guenther of the Remote Education Systems (RES) project within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Education

2 September, University of New England, Armidale

Abstract

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

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

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

Culturally and contextually responsive schools: what are they and why do they matter?

NYANGATJATJARA COLLEGE

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Armidale, 2 September 2015
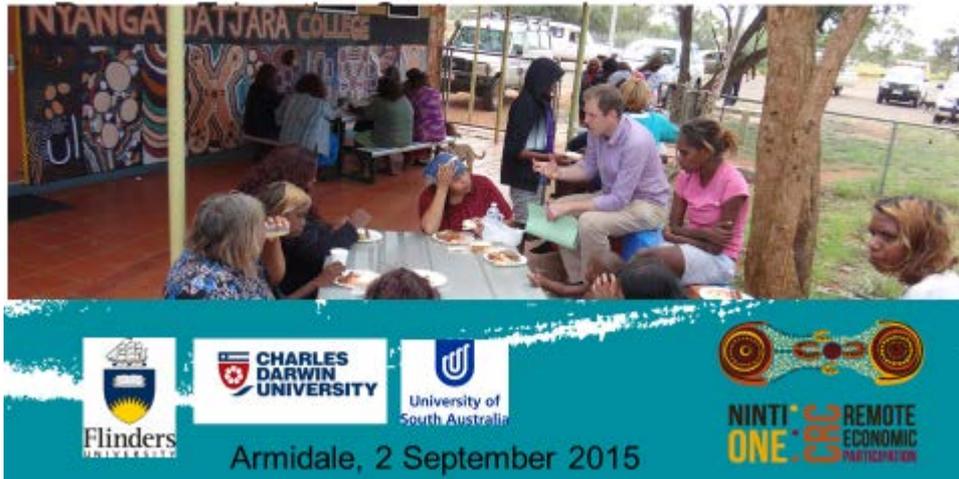
My aim in this lecture is to present findings from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems (RES) project. This is the seventh in a series of ten lectures. So far in the series topics we have covered include 'What is education for in remote communities?', 'disadvantage and advantage in remote schools', 'complexity and chaos in remote schools', 'workforce development for remote education', 'successful remote schools: what are they?', and 'teacher quality and qualities'. I am happy to share the text of all the lectures we have given so far.

Introduction

- The RES lecture series: what's it about?
- Outline
  - What does culturally or contextually responsive mean?
  - Methods and data sources
  - Findings
  - Implications
  - Q&A

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.

In this lecture I want to explore the topic of culturally and contextually responsive schools. I think this is important because there has been a lot of talk over recent years about a range of responses to Indigenous education generally, with phrases like 'culturally appropriate', 'culturally safe', 'cultural competence and awareness' and more recently 'culturally responsive'. These are all of course quite slippery terms and sometimes it is not clear what people mean when they use these terms. They certainly are not the same. In this lecture I'll differentiate between and define two separate concepts: 'culturally responsive' and 'contextually responsive'. The distinctions between these terms and their implications are based on the data.

What does the literature say about culturally or contextually responsive education for remote communities?

What does the literature say about culturally or contextually responsive education for remote communities?

- Indigenous education in history (Lee et al. 2014 on NT schooling)
- The rise of both ways, two ways and bilingual education in the 1970s (Harris 1990, Yunupingu 1999)
- Mutual obligation, reciprocity, give and take (Lee et al. 2014)
- No compromise in epistemology (Chirgwin and Huijser 2015)
- Batchelor as a case (Ober and Bat 2007)
- Key Indigenous academics (Arbon 2008, Yunkaporta 2009, Sarra 2011, Nakata 2007, Nakata et al 2012)
- Generative knowledge creation (Christie 2011)

I'll confess at the outset that much of the literature I draw on here and examples I give, come out of the Northern Territory. What I say here may be somewhat different in other jurisdictions. There are two good reasons for this focus on the Northern Territory. One is that it is a context I have worked in now for more than 12 years. The other is simply that of all jurisdictions, the NT has the highest proportion of very remote Indigenous students in schools.

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

> *Attitudes of disdain fuelled by 19th century Social Darwinist notions gave way to assimilation and integration as prevailing ideologies in the early 20th century. The removal of children, particularly with lighter skin from their mothers, with the view to absorb them into dominant culture society was so comprehensive, this policy period which continued until the 1970s came to be known as the 'Stolen Generation'.* (Osborne, forthcoming, p. 7)

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

Many of the contemporary discourses about remote education seemingly ignore these rich discourses about the potential for culturally and contextually responsive models of education. Instead, what we hear is talk about 'disadvantage', 'closing gaps', deficits and failure (Abbott, 2014;

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

Quick fixes built on false premises

- 'teachers make the most difference' (Hattie 2003);
- Attendance programs will yield better academic outcomes (Ladwig and Luke 2013);
- Education is the 'key' (Guenther 2013b);
- No jobs in communities (McRae-Williams and Guenther 2014);
- Remoteness and Indigeneity are disadvantages (Guenther et al 2013);
- The 'goodness' of boarding schools (Penfold 2014; Wilson 2014);
- The myth of best practice (Guenther et al. 2015).

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

I could go on! The point is that current policy level thinking takes us away from approaches which are truly respectful of local cultures, language and identities that are connected to land, kinship and the enduring cosmologies on which they are based. I would suggest that (despite what some may) say, 'best practice' in boarding schools (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, 2015) is a myth. Closing the gap is not about meeting in the middle, it's about meeting at the western end of a continuum that sees value in western cultures and little more than dysfunction, despair and failure in Indigenous cultures. But the irony, as I have suggested earlier, is that virtually every initiative tried

in the past has failed despite the apparent hegemony of the state to effect change. Nothing has changed (J Guenther, 2013b) .The reality is that neither western or Indigenous cultures have all the answers. That's why both-ways approaches to education (or their many culturally and contextually responsive variants) are important to our thinking and practice in education. The research I present in this lecture, gives the view from the perspective of remote education stakeholders, and particularly the perspectives of locals who live and belong in remote communities.

Methodology

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 culturally and contextually responsive schools comes mainly from non-remote stakeholders, some of who were also either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Also, I'll confess that most of our data comes from the NT, WA and SA. Our data does include voices of some in Queensland and NSW but it is not strong.

| 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. While not perfect, this process did to some extent take into account our biases. I would also add that our project advisory group's Indigenous members have contributed significantly to our thinking as we have reflected on what people say.

Distribution of results
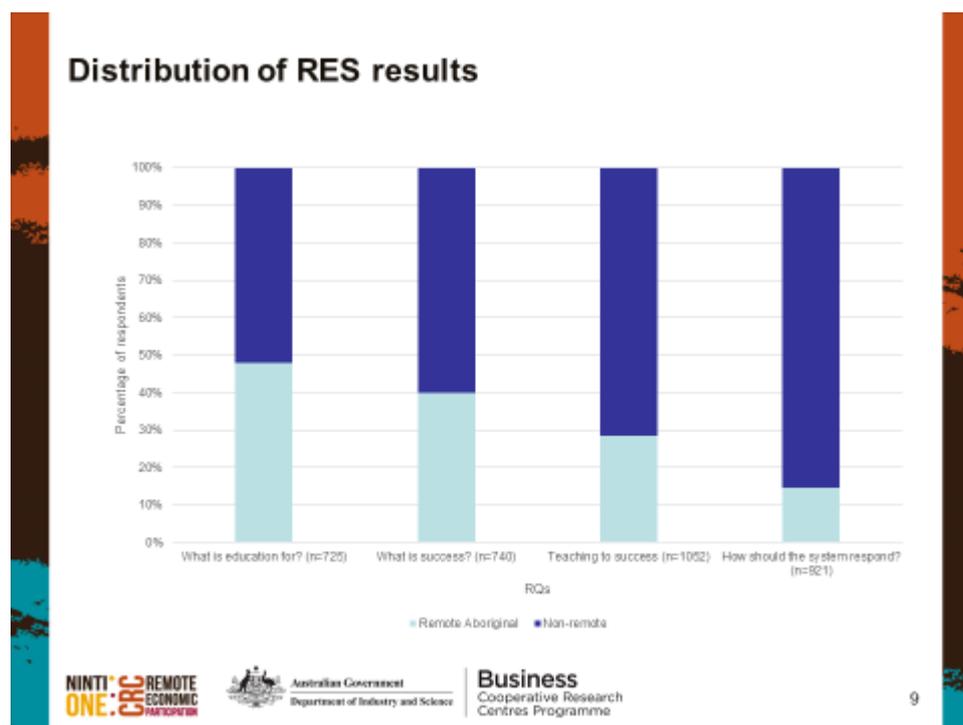
The next figure presents the findings in terms of references coded for each RQ. The largest number of references (1052) were coded to RQ3. Before I go on to talk about the specifics of RQ3 though, note that proportionally, the responses from remote Aboriginal stakeholders decreased with each RQ, from nearly 50% at RQ1 to about 15% at RQ4. What these differences in response rates may suggest is that remote Aboriginal respondents are more concerned about the deeper philosophical questions about why education matters than they are concerned about how kids should be taught or how policy should respond to remote communities' education needs. The difference could also be explained by a lack of awareness of what happens in schools, and even more so what happens in relation to policy. It could also mean that remote Aboriginal respondents are disenfranchised from school and policy processes. Regardless it points to an important engagement gap that, if reduced would allow local people to have greater ownership of school and educational strategic directions.

Teaching to success
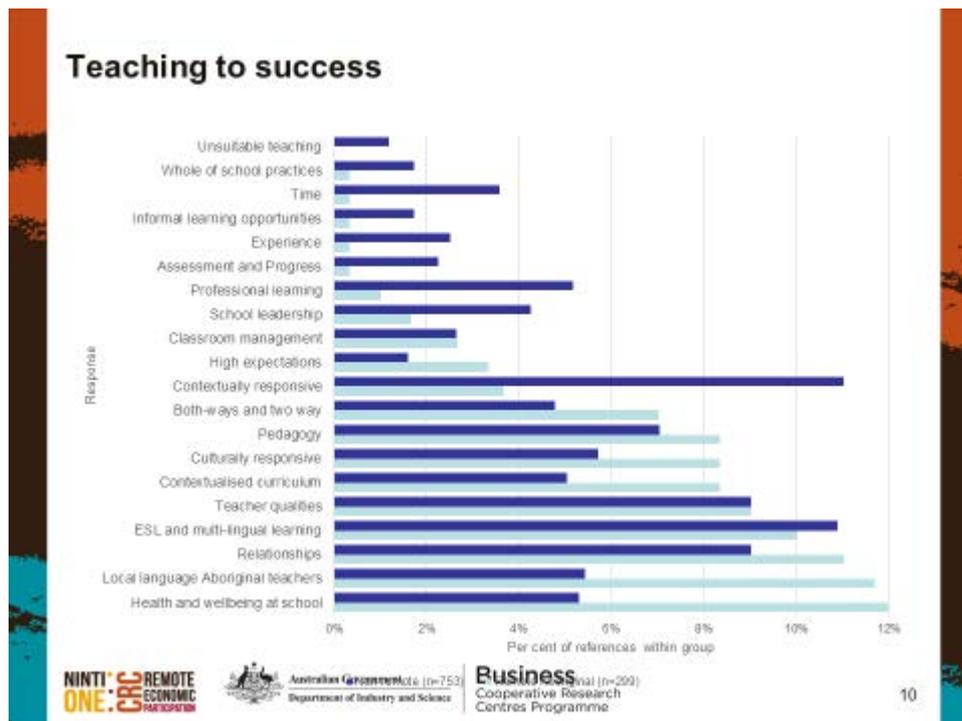
The chart here summarises the results for RQ3 sorted in order of importance for remote Aboriginal respondents. As we have listed the themes here, **health and wellbeing at school** tops the list. This is not just about teaching about health and wellbeing, it is more about recognising the health, wellbeing and safety needs of students above all else. Other contributors to successful teaching included having **local language teachers** (a topic that my colleague Samantha Disbray discussed in Lecture 4), **relationships, ESL and multilingual learning and teacher qualities** (which I discussed in lecture 6). You'll note though that with the exception of the latter, for non-local respondents (the dark blue bars) other factors are more important for non-locals. Being **contextually responsive** is right up there for non-locals. If we conflated this with '**culturally responsive'** into one—and it might be tempting to do so given they sound similar—it would have been the strongest theme emerging from the data. The same would happen if we merged '**both ways and two way**' with culturally responsive.

The chart shows other similar-sounding themes like '**contextualised curriculum'** which we could have clustered together with these themes too, but I think it is important to distinguish between general approaches to teaching and content. I'll be talking about contextualised curriculum, or as we've called it, 'red dirt curriculum' in the next lecture later this month.

Note too, that some things that stand out as important for non-locals, hardly rate a mention for remote Aboriginal respondents. There are some good reasons for this simply because of the positions that locals and non-locals take as they discuss issues of importance to them.

What does contextually responsive mean?

What does contextually responsive mean?

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

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The table here summarises how respondents talked about contextually responsive teaching. As suggested by the earlier chart, overall this is not an important issue for remote Aboriginal respondents. Why? Because by and large they do not have to 'respond' to the context as non-remote stakeholders do. The handful of comments they do make are about how non-locals should or should not respond to *their* context.

But for non-locals, the difference of the context they find themselves in, stands out. As such they firstly describe reflexively, how *they* should or shouldn't respond (mostly as teachers). To some extent this is a reflection of their separate positions or identities—separate from parents, students, language, and community. Some describe this in terms of complexity because for them it is a complex system they find themselves in. For more on complexity, I'll refer you to lecture 3. Some describe their response in terms of respecting and understanding different knowledge systems and definitions related to aspects of a successful education. **In summary, contextually responsive teachers bring a degree of self-reflexivity to their roles in schools and communities, being aware of the differences that present to them within the context and responding with flexibility.**

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What does culturally responsive mean?

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

While our analysis doesn't show as many responses categorised as 'culturally responsive' teaching the proportion of remote Aboriginal responses is much higher than for 'contextually responsive' teaching. What's more if we add in the 'both-ways and two way' responses, as I have done in the next table, the strength of the local Aboriginal response becomes clearer.

More than two-thirds of the 58 responses from remote Aboriginal respondents belong under three themes: language and culture, both ways and two ways, and cultural awareness. In terms of the former, responses recognised the centrality of language and culture as an essential component of successful teaching. The theme of 'cultural awareness' was raised in a number of ways, but not as a product of some kind of training.

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On both ways and two ways

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'Two way' learning is about respect, we respect English, they have to respect our language. We all need to learn two way, Kardiya and Yapa because we are both equal.

We have strong relationships with young people from across Australia. We go to them and we learn from them. They come to us and we teach them.
Kids need to learn on country – two ways…learning from senior community members/elders.

They need the AEW there to help teachers - both ways - they listen when you talking in English they know.

Aboriginal culture is not formally taught but we sit with staff and tell them about our ways, language and help them in dealing with local issues

I've chosen a small selection of quotes from some of our remote Aboriginal respondents to give a sense of what they mean by both ways. As you read these, you'll see the significance of things like respect, being equal, learning from each other, prioritising local knowledge, listening and working together. From Warlpiri educators we heard:

> *'Two way' learning is about respect, we respect English, they have to respect our language. They say 'two way' but they don't learn. We all need to learn two way, Kardiya and Yapa because we are both equal.*

From a southern NT educator

> *We have strong relationships with young people from across Australia. We go to them and we learn from them. They come to us and we teach them.*

And from a southern NT community member

> *Kids need to learn on country – two ways. Anything about the environment like birds, animals, making spears, digging sticks, teaching art and painting with senior students – learning from senior community members/elders.*

From the APY Lands

> *They need the AEW there to help teachers - both ways - they listen when you talking in English they know.*

And from one of our Collegial snapshots:

> *Aboriginal culture is not formally taught but we sit with staff and tell them about our ways, language and help them in dealing with local issues (parents or kids)*

On the topic of language and culture

On language and culture

Well me and [name] worked on the curriculum, getting everything from the elders, because they wanted language and culture to be taught in the school.

If they learn Yapa way from elders, if they really learn, they can teach young ones about Yapa way.

Anangu have important stories for the children to learn, the dreaming tjukurpa, the land, family connections, culture and other learning. This is our foundation.

Cultural competence is critical —[we] all are aware of this.

...if you don't have a relationship in the first place and if you don't have knowledge of the culture of the people and the language and how you can then employ that in the work that you do with the students?

Here are some examples from remote Aboriginal stakeholders about language and culture:

Firstly from a remote educator in WA

> *Well me and [name] worked on the curriculum, getting everything from the elders, because they wanted language and culture to be taught in the school. We went around recording the things they wanted taught in the school to their children.*

And then a Warlpiri educator

> *If they learn Yapa way from elders, if they really learn, they can teach young ones about Yapa way.*

And from the APY Lands

> *Anangu have important stories for the children to learn, the dreaming tjukurpa, the land, family connections, culture and other learning. This is our foundation.*

And from non-remote stakeholders commenting on successful remote teaching. Firstly from our Collegial Snapshot data

> *There appears to be lots of community cultural interaction …language classes each week; art and dance with the Art Centre/Cultural Festival and lots of joint activities at the PCYC….*

And from the principal of a boarding school

> *Cultural competence is critical –[we] all are aware of this..*

From a remote school teacher:

> *It's not just the relationships, it is learning about the community and it's learning about the culture of the community and the language. Building up those relationships with people doesn't work if you don't have a relationship in the first place and if you don't have knowledge of the culture of the people and the language and how you can then employ that in the work that you do with the students?*

On cultural awareness
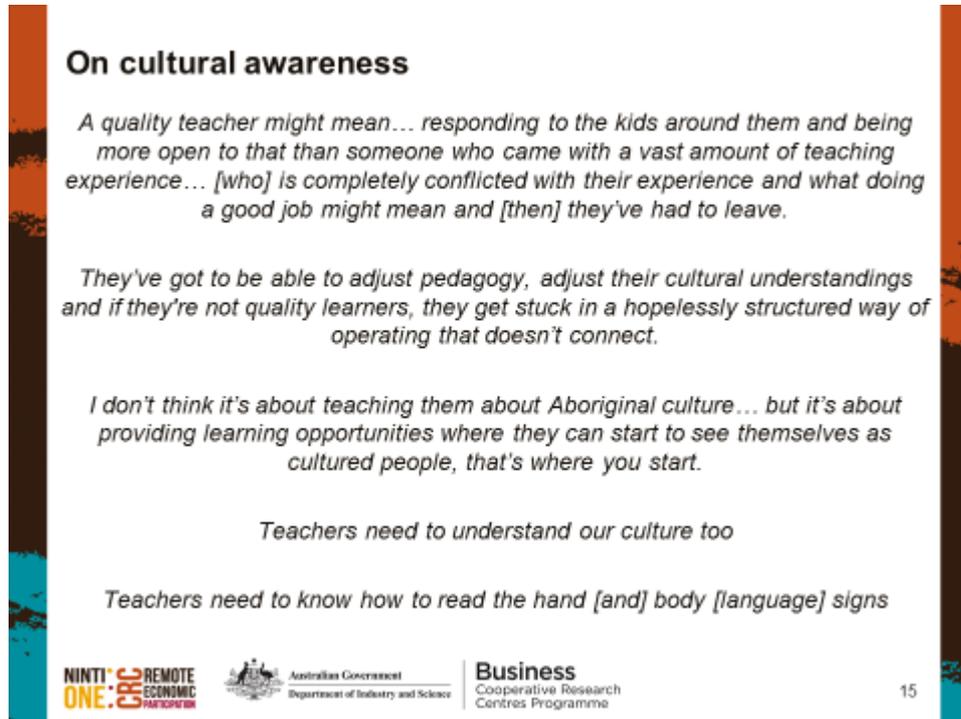
On cultural awareness

A quality teacher might mean... responding to the kids around them and being more open to that than someone who came with a vast amount of teaching experience... [who] is completely conflicted with their experience and what doing a good job might mean and [then] they've had to leave.

They've got to be able to adjust pedagogy, adjust their cultural understandings and if they're not quality learners, they get stuck in a hopelessly structured way of operating that doesn't connect.

I don't think it's about teaching them about Aboriginal culture... but it's about providing learning opportunities where they can start to see themselves as cultured people, that's where you start.

Teachers need to understand our culture too

Teachers need to know how to read the hand [and] body [language] signs

A couple of non-local teachers commented on cultural responsiveness in connection with teacher quality:

> *A quality teacher might mean… responding to the kids around them and that culture and perhaps being more open to that than someone who came with a vast amount of teaching experience… [who] is completely conflicted with their experience and what doing a good job might mean and [then] they've had to leave.*

> *They've got to be able to adjust pedagogy, adjust their cultural understandings and if they're not quality learners, they get stuck in a hopelessly structured way of operating that doesn't connect.*

Another non-remote stakeholder commented on the need for self-aware teachers:

> *I don't think it's about teaching them about Aboriginal culture through an online class or anything like that but it's about providing learning opportunities where they can start to see themselves as cultured people, that's where you start.*

A remote Aboriginal respondent put this issue very simply:

> *Teachers need to understand our culture too*

Practically this translates into simple things like:

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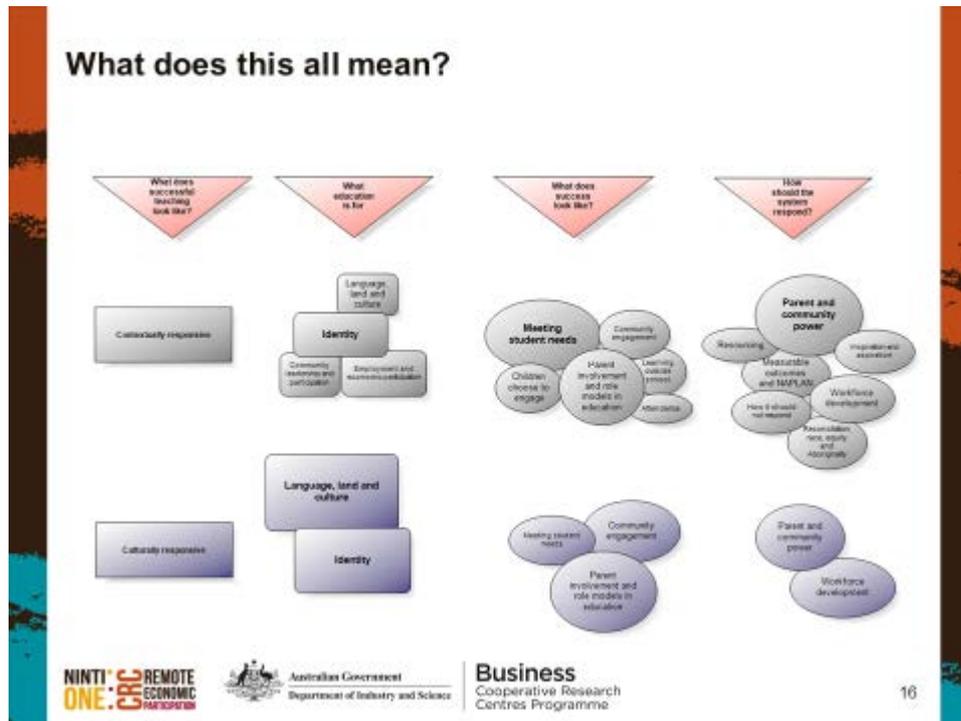
Part of our analysis has looked at what else shows up when people talk about what successful teaching looks like, in terms of what education is for, what success looks like and how the wider system should respond.

I've represented that analysis for cultural and contextually responsive remote teaching in the model shown here. I'll explain it like this. If respondents commented on contextually responsive teaching as 'teaching to success', they also talked about the **purpose** of education being to support and strengthen student identity first and then language, land and culture, economic participation and community leadership/participation. At the same time they talked about **success** defined primarily in terms of meeting student needs first, then parent involvement and role models in education and engagement. And at the same time they also talked about building parent and community power, as the main appropriate **system responses** to this. For those talking about successful remote teaching in terms of being culturally responsive, the issues they raised in terms of success, purpose and system response, were quite similar with varying emphases.

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

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

Key issues and solutions

- Shifting the dominant discourse: how do we do it?
- The challenge for boarding schools
- Practical steps to make schools contextually and culturally responsive
  1. Operation school councils with local representation
  2. Employ at least as many locals as non-locals
  3. Local leaders involved in developing curriculum offerings, local educators teaching local knowledge
  4. PD opportunities for local staff
  5. School leadership accountability for these goals

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

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

There are some pretty straight forward solutions to the issues I've raised here for remote schools though. If community and parent power are important elements to a system response surely we would build structures into schools that demand the inclusion of local voice in the governance of schools. Having an operational school council in some instances would be a start. Ensuring that (like

other school councils in urbanised parts of Australia) the council has parents and community members on board would be logical. Secondly, you would ensure that as many local people were employed at a school as non-locals. We know that local employment makes a difference to educational outcomes, and it doesn't have to be teaching assistants or teachers. It could be the bus driver, the receptionist, the groundsman or people that come in to prepare school lunches or breakfasts. Thirdly, you would have local elders actively involved in building a contextually responsive curriculum. You would have regular bush trips where senior locals would be the educators, teaching from their local and traditional knowledge. Fourthly you would ensure that your local staff were given appropriate professional learning opportunities, to the same extent that non-locals do. You'd be supporting and encouraging (if not demanding) non-locals and locals to work collaboratively.

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

Conclusions

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

All of these things become problematic for a system that demands results, looks for magic bullets (i.e. implementing what works with simple logic), thrives on programs, and continually tries to close gaps by pushing for change in one direction. It is a problem for systems where the quality of teaching and teachers is determined according to measures calculated in places remote from the context of communities. It is a problem for systems that determine success on the basis of measures that have little meaning to communities. It is a problem for systems that prioritise the teaching of English over the teaching of local languages. It is a problem too for boarding schools which are geographically and sometimes, maybe often, culturally disconnected from the home communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

As I have tried to show in the literature, the quest for culturally responsive, both ways education is not new. But 40 years on from the first use of that phrase, it remains elusive in the compulsory years of education. I'd suggest though that if it is possible in higher education institutions such as Batchelor (and there are of course other training institutions that adopt similar strategies and philosophies) then it could work in schools too. If then this is a desirable thing (and it clearly is from a remote community perspective) how can we make it happen?

That's a challenge. Let me be clear though. What we've found isn't a magic bullet that will solve problems for policy makers and departmental bureaucrats. What we do have though is evidence for a case to be made for an education system that meets the needs of people in remote communities. I haven't got time in this lecture to detail what I think are the ways forward, but I'd suggest that we need to move away from best 'practice approaches' and 'what works' towards innovative and creative attempts at enacting some of the expressed desires that come through our work. I'm suggesting that we have an obligation to build the evidence base and generate learning about culturally and contextually responsive education for remote students, rather than simply drawing on an evidence base that has failed to yield the expected results for students who deserve better.

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