



Research Brief

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Red Dirt Teaching – developing the right workforce for remote schools

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RESEARCH AIM

Remote Education Systems has gathered and analysed qualitative data from over 230 remote education stakeholders and more than 700 others through surveys over the last four years (see <http://crc-rep.com/remote-education-systems>).

The project was designed to investigate perceptions and aspirations for effective education of remote Indigenous students, and this paper examines the implications for developing the workforce needed to achieve effective schooling.

Four research questions guided the study

1. What is education for in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?
2. What defines 'successful' educational outcomes from the remote standpoint?
3. How should teaching and learning look to achieve 'success' as defined by this standpoint?
4. What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?

KEY FINDINGS

The following are crucial to good teaching in remote schools:

- Schools in remote communities are best framed as sites for learning partnerships at a cultural interface
- Programs with contextually responsive pedagogies
- Support for home language and culture in teaching and learning
- Training for teachers to teach English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D)
- Promoting cultural safety and well-being, for students and staff

In response to these findings, we propose schools focus on learning partnerships among staff, in particular local and non-local staff, through orientation processes, team teaching and team learning, supporting first language programs, and developing EAL/D teaching and learning capacity. In addition, we propose partnerships between schools and those outside allow schools to develop programs for their students that are contextually responsive and foster community involvement. Such partners include elders, community members and expert staff from other organisations and projects.

1. Introduction

Schools in remote Indigenous communities are unique cultural interfaces (Gower & Byrne, 2012). They are learning sites where local adults and adults from places that are geographically and socially dramatically different, come together to teach and learn. The student cohort is overwhelmingly local and their histories, experiences and languages are distinct from those of the non-local staff. Local staff, students and families experiences and expectations of schooling, teaching and the interface itself is profoundly different to that of the visiting staff. This has implications for the preparation, on-going learning and practice of effective educators in these sites (Parding, 2013; Santoro, Reid, Crawford, & Simpson, 2011).

The Remote Education Systems project (RES) has gathered data on perceptions and attitudes to education from some 250 project participants directly, and some 800 through further studies. We sought involvement from various stakeholders, including remote Aboriginal people, overwhelmingly from the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia, regions the project has dubbed 'Red Dirt' places (Bat & Guenther, 2013; Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2014; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Osborne, Lester, Minutjukur, & Tjitayi, 2014). This paper investigates how our research can inform workforce development for remote schools. While the research was carried out across remote Australia, and the findings and implications address the current policy framework in the Northern Territory, it also has wider application.

2. Literature

Mulford (2011) notes a similarity between a wealth of recent Australian and international research on teacher and school leader quality and the more broadly recommended policy and practice in Indigenous education, recognising the importance of three key themes. First, a number of studies have emphasised the significance of sustained individual and collective capacity building to provide the sort of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable school communities to create their own futures (Behrendt & McCausland, 2008; Helm & Lamb, 2011; Lambert, 2005; Oliver, Rochecouste, Vanderford, & Grote, 2011; Parding, 2013; Santoro, 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). A further important perspective examines notions of culturally responsive and contextually responsive education practices, as socially just, pedagogically effective and transformative (Beresford & Gray, 2012; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Fogarty, 2013; Fogarty & Schwab, 2012; Gower & Byrne, 2012; Klenowski, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Luke, Woods, Land, Bahr, & McFarland, 2002; Martin, 2003). Perhaps at the heart of this responsiveness are understandings of what schooling is for, and what a community wants for and from its youth in terms of education and learning (Kral & Falk, 2004). The aspirations expressed by Tripcony (2007, p. 5) appear widely held:

we should aim for our children to gain the skills and knowledge to be bi-cultural – to be able to confidently communicate with and/or work within mainstream organizations, while at the same time maintaining their own unique identities and connections with their families, communities and cultures.

The final theme that resonates through the research literature is working together through partnerships, networks and shared leadership in schools, between schools and between schools and communities (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000; Byrne & Munns, 2012; Santoro et al., 2011).

These points are echoed in our research. Though many of the complexities of education delivery are not unique to remote Indigenous education settings, the current study addresses some specific matters. First, it is one of a small proportion that focuses on remote and very remote locations and the views of remote

Aboriginal people as well as non-local education staff (Colman-Dimon, 2000; Commonwealth of Australia, 1996; Kral & Falk, 2004; Wearne & Yunupingu, 2011). Further, according to the Northern Territory Department of Education, over 90% of students in very remote schools are emergent bilinguals, i.e. students who are speakers of local traditional and/or contemporary language(s), adding English to their language repertoire as they grow up (Wilson, 2014). This is a mundane observation at one level, and yet its implications are surprisingly little understood or addressed in schooling, in interventions or testing regimes (Angelo, 2013b; Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Loakes, 2011).

Student's language backgrounds are frequently portrayed as a 'gap', a challenge common to many speakers of minority languages (McCarty & Zentella, 2015). However, from the perspective of remote Aboriginal people this is not the case. Indeed our research showed for many remote community members, children's home language(s) were seen as integral to school learning in a number of ways; instrumentally as a means of accessing new knowledge; in consideration of identity and well-being; and as a skill and valuable social resource in and of itself, bound to local cultural knowledge (Marmion, Obata, & Troy, 2014; Minutjukur et al., 2014; Osborne et al., 2014).

3. Methods & Data

Qualitative data was collected from mid 2012 through to the end of 2014 and a series of community surveys, semi-structured interviews, site observations in 10 remote communities, and focus group discussions. These interactions were guided by the following four research questions:

- RQ1.** What is education for in remote Australia and what can/should it achieve?
- RQ2.** What are 'successful' educational outcomes?
- RQ3.** How does teaching need to change in order to achieve 'success'?
- RQ4.** What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?

We interviewed and carried out focus group discussions with Aboriginal parents, assistant teachers, teachers and community members living in the NT and South Australia, including Yulara, Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Wadeye. In addition, non-Indigenous teachers and assistant teachers, school leaders, community members, policy makers, government officials, university lecturers and researchers, VET and higher education students, youth workers, child care workers, education union members, and representatives from NGOs, who were living in, had lived and/or worked closely with remote Indigenous communities took part in interviews and focus group discussions. Urban centres for data collection included Alice Springs, Adelaide, Darwin, Perth and Broome. Overwhelmingly the data was collected in English.

Our research drew on:

- Community surveys in 10 remote communities
- Observations from site visits in 3 jurisdictions (WA, SA, NT)
- 35 individual or small group semi-structured interviews, each lasting generally between 1 and 2 hours
- Engagement of over 200 remote education stakeholders in 20 formal focus group discussions, which we have called 'Thinking Outside The Tank' sessions

- Dare to Lead¹ Snapshots in 31 very remote schools
 - Reading of the relevant research literature; and
- Publicly available datasets including Census data and My School®. (See <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/data> and <http://www.myschool.edu.au/>)

3.1 Qualitative analysis

Data from all sources was incorporated into a single Nvivo database². All the research data from the RES project was entered into the Nvivo database including transcripts of interviews and focus groups, summaries of surveys, images of whiteboards and butchers paper and hand written notes, along with electronic reports with secondary source data.

The process of ‘coding’ is a highly interpretive task that requires considerable critical reflection. In the first instance the project team came together to conceptualise a coding structure built on the research questions. Some themes or nodes³ were proposed at this time. Following this, the team worked on coding each document. In this, the coder codes the content of a section (or entire document) for its theme. Each coded item is termed a ‘reference’. Additional nodes were created as required, consistent with a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin, 2010). The team then came together for a two day workshop to test the structure, validate coding, and to check consistency between coders. Following this, the team finalised the coding before coming together again for a further two day workshop to rationalise the structure, check node content and consider implications of the data. The process was completed in February 2015.

3.2 Overview of document sources

The analysis draws on the data sources shown below in Table 1. The largest amount of data came from 45 focus groups and 25 interviews with remote education stakeholders. Also included was data from reports of additional research either conducted by or for the RES project team, including an analysis of 31 very remote schools’ Collegial Snapshots conducted by Principals Australia Institute and the Australian Council for Educational Research. Through the coding system, it was possible to quantify the number of references by remote Aboriginal community stakeholders. We defined these stakeholders as Aboriginal people who resided and came from a remote location (as defined by the ABS (2011) remoteness structure), or with a strong family connection to a remote location. In this report, their responses (references in NVivo terminology) are displayed separately from non-Indigenous respondents and Indigenous respondents, who do not reside in, or have strong family connection to, a remote location. The reason for this distinction was to ensure the responses by remote Indigenous people could be identified

¹ *Dare to Lead* was a school leader-focused project designed to enhance educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and promote Reconciliation developed by Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council.

² Nvivo is a qualitative data analysis software program that allows research objects (which could be images, text, audio or video), and more importantly sections of them (comments or ‘references’), to be coded into themes.

³ A node is a collection of references about a specific theme, place, person or other area of interest.

Table 1. Document sources and coding references

Document source	All Sources	All coding references*	Remote Aboriginal references*	Number of unique participants
Interviews and focus groups	45	2501	523	250
Field notes and observations	12	111	0	0
Secondary sources/reports created by or for RES	10	856	603	~800
Butchers papers and whiteboards	20	197	0	0
Total	87	3665	1126	~1250

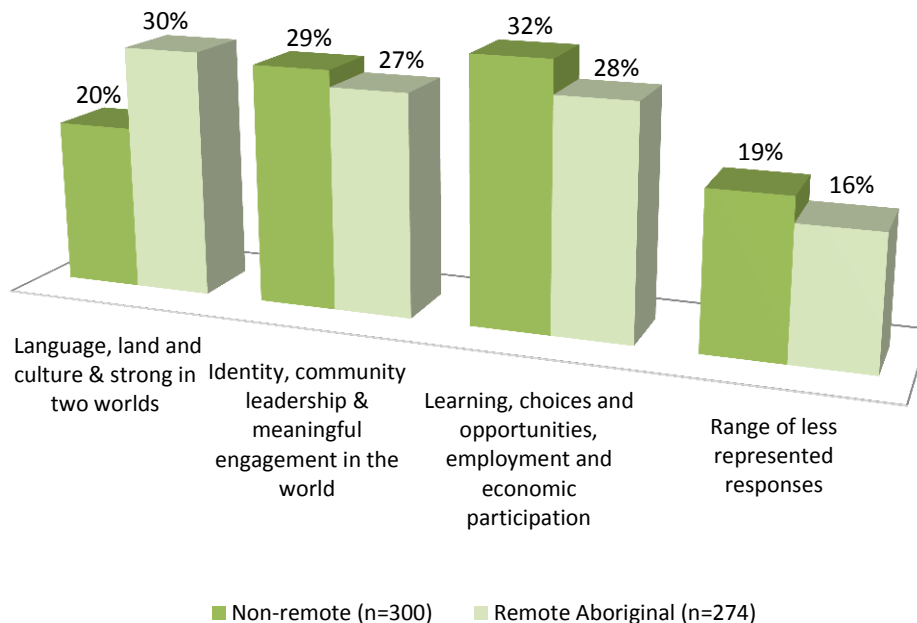
* includes coding references assigned outside of the research questions. Please note, some survey reports used for this analysis did not detail the participant numbers.

4. Results

In this paper we report on responses to the first and third research question. ‘Developing workforce’ emerged as a strong theme in relation to question 4 about system response, but question 3 provided nuanced insights into the demands of remote teaching. The themes identified in the first round of coding have been grouped into related thematic sets to synthesise key results.

4.1 Education: What for?

Figure 1. Education: What for?



The themes that emerged from the 574 coded references (300 from non-remote, 274 from remote Aboriginal respondents) are shown in figure 1, revealing the three sets of themes are fairly evenly represented in responses relating to research question 1. The strongest themes regarding the purpose of education for remote Aboriginal respondents was to learn language, country and local knowledge, and for students to become Two-Ways strong, though this was less represented in the responses from non-remote participants. For both remote and non-remote Aboriginal respondents, the idea of *Two-Way* broadly involves language knowledge, including literacy skills of home language and English, and cultural and social knowledge pertaining to Indigenous and non-Indigenous domains.

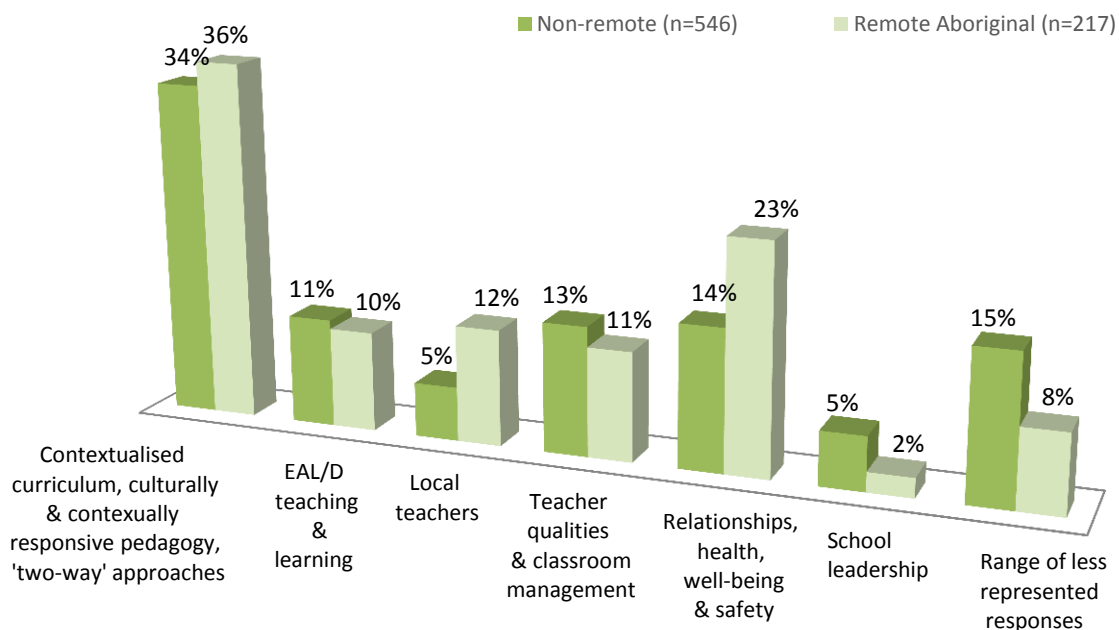
The second set of themes involved comments about the importance of education to support a student’s identity that promote community leadership and prepare young people for meaningful engagement in the world. For many respondents, this dovetailed with comments about becoming Two-Ways strong, expressing aspirations for people to be a capable member of one’s own community, with the skills to live as a competent adult in and (in more non-remote comments than remote Aboriginal participant’s comments) out of one’s home community.

A similar proportion of responses from remote and non-remote Aboriginal respondents talked about the goal of education as might be expected; to learn to get a job, to have choices, and employment. Seven themes are grouped in the final less represented group of responses and these included sport, fun and socialisation to schooling.

4.2 Successful teaching

A high proportion of the 763 references are from non-remote respondents (546), and were coded in response to the question ‘How does teaching need to change in order to achieve ‘success’? and responses were most concentrated in the data from teachers. Nevertheless 217 responses from Remote Aboriginal participants were coded.

Figure 2. Successful Teaching



Contextually responsive pedagogies

The set of themes grouped and strongly represented captured references to pedagogies that are adaptive to the context. Many comments focussed on incorporating students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and learning needs. For the remote Aboriginal respondents, this focussed on first language and culture instruction within a two-ways approach. Non-remote respondents discussed the importance of teaching in a 'contextually responsive' way as being informed, adaptive, flexible in their teaching, using differentiated approaches to teaching, understanding complexity in the teaching context, and using creative ways to engage students. Most of these comments came from teachers and school leaders. Many voiced frustration about the limitations placed on them in meeting student needs, given the pressures of meeting national literacy and numeracy benchmarks.

Certainly, the pressures against responsive teaching are noted by Beresford and Gray, who wrote:

All data since the inception of this national testing in 2008 shows mean scores for Indigenous students are consistently and substantially lower than those for non-Indigenous students. The impact on pedagogy and curriculum has been a serious focus on compensatory skills development, with systems, schools and teachers mandating minimum curriculum time for literacy and numeracy, and specific skills-focused pedagogy, on a daily basis. This skills focus leaves little room in an already crowded curriculum for teachers to draw on culturally appropriate, engaging activities in the classroom, further increasing the potential alienation of Indigenous students already vulnerable through structural disadvantage. (Beresford and Gray, 2012, p. 147)

Three further themes relate to pedagogy and are not grouped with the themes above; English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D), local teachers, and teacher qualities.

English as an Additional Language or Dialect

The strongest single pedagogical theme, in terms of total proportion of references was EAL/D and multilingual learning, and while many respondents showed awareness that their students faced challenges being taught in English, few had training or support to meet these needs. Some respondents pointed to a lack of policy, implementation, training and professional learning in EAL/D. Comments echoed observations from the Language Perspectives project in QLD:

teachers are confused because they have taught curriculum content and corrected students' work (as if for first language speakers of SAE [Standard Australian English]), but their students are not progressing as they believe they should (if they were first language speakers of SAE). Similarly, students know that they are 'trying, trying, but never quite getting it right'. (Nakata in Sellwood & Angelo 2013, p. 254)

Finally, in this set some responses suggested first language instruction as crucial to effective learning in remote schools.

Local teachers

The comments that addressed local educators included discussion of a number of roles; local fully qualified teachers, assistant teachers and other local staff. Their role as teachers of student's first language(s) was discussed more by remote Aboriginal respondents than non-remote Indigenous respondents, however from both groups there were comments about their role in explaining English language content to

students. Comments also focused on their being an integral part of two-way learning, their role as a link between non-local staff and families, community and local knowledge, the need for their active engagement in classrooms, and working in tandem with non-local staff to ensure student well-being and safety. Respondents identified the importance of relationships in this context, which are discussed further below.

Teacher qualities and Classroom Management

The final pedagogical themes are teacher qualities and classroom management. An important and commonly cited teacher quality was being a good and willing learner, along with being calm, friendly, positive, respectful and having good relationships. These dovetailed with notions of positive classroom management. However, further issues for classroom management were raised; emotional vulnerability and teasing, links between student academic success and behaviour, parental support, and whole of school practices.

Relationships, health and well-being

The last substantial set draws together social and physical well-being themes – relationships, and health and safety. It captures a very complex nexus of issues, not all of which are strictly pedagogical but nevertheless crucial to teaching in remote schools. References to relationships featured very strongly in this set and were spread throughout all responses but particularly from remote Aboriginal respondents. These comments included the importance of positive personal and professional relationships between non-local school staff and local school staff; through valuing local staff and the community, team teaching, and leadership roles for Indigenous staff within the school. Commitment to developing positive relationships between non-local school staff and children and families was highlighted.

Relationships between schools and other agencies, such as the clinic, hearing services and other services, were more prominent in the comments of non-remote respondents and intersected with references to health. Comments about health and well-being at school were discussed in terms of children's well-being at school as a priority; such as teasing, safety, school as a safe place, along with concerns about hearing, mental health, resilience and healthy food. 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 discussed the need for schools to ensure student well-being was foundationally important for teaching and learning, and for many remote Aboriginal respondents, this entailed including children's home language and knowledge in school. The inclusion of home language and culture in school is an important way of establishing and promoting local teachers' cultural safety in the school.

5. Discussion: Developing the right workforce for remote schools

To relate the results discussed so far to policies, practices and proposals we return to where we started - framing schools as sites for learning, or more precisely as sites for learning partnerships. Doing so goes to the core of being contextually responsive, as the teachers or indeed teaching programs that fit red dirt schools are not there on the shelf, but need to be developed. Thus, system responses need to involve ongoing and long term investment. This is of course true for teachers generally (Archer, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Day, 2002; Evans, 2011), and indeed mastery in any field, however is particularly acute in the remote

education context, where the school can be a very alienating place, for staff and for students. This section discusses a number of actions and strategies for developing a red dirt workforce and workplace.

Local Orientation

Developing and delivering local orientation for new non-local staff is a worthwhile investment. It not only provides important knowledge for new staff, but its development and enactment offers a forum for validation of local cultural and language knowledge, and also for local experience. Some local educators shared their experiences of providing walking orientation/introduction sessions in their community, as they lead their new colleagues around their home community. New teachers found out about local services, history, where there may be restrictions on access, issues with dogs and most importantly perhaps, who lives where – a form of cultural safety. These descriptions positioned orientation as a meaningful part of relationship building and community engagement. This was particularly strengthened when principals and other school leaders actively sought the involvement of a range of community members, school staff (teaching or non-teaching), families, and elders as advisors for working committees dedicated to develop and deliver orientation programs and language programs for new staff.

New local staff also need orientation to the workplace procedures and routines of a particular school. Collaboration by non-local staff and local (local-non-local) staff to develop such sessions opens potential for dialogue about their professional roles and the interface they work in. This leads to the next point, team teaching.

Learning together and team teaching

In the Northern Territory education department there is a strong history of team teaching (Bowman, Pascoe, & Joy, 1999), with a formal program of professional learning resources and a clear method for fostering learning, planning and teaching in local-non-local teacher teams (Graham & Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999). This has the potential to address one of Mulford's points above: "to increase and sustain individual and collective capacity building to provide knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable school communities to create their own futures". However, team teaching in a cross-cultural setting such as a remote school is not a skill that teachers have in their tool kit. There are professional learning resources, but the linchpin in this practice is the active support of principals to ensure team teaching becomes established practice – a 'way we do things' in schools, regularly and continuously.

In some schools we have also observed how the Visible Learning program has supported team teaching, or provided at the very least a way to foster joint professional reflection and learning practices.

Local educators

The research has clearly identified a range of crucial roles that local educators play, and their importance in guiding non-local teachers in their community and school. The recent work of Shore and colleagues (2014) explores issues of work and training for local educators in detail. There were resonances in the RES data with this work, as respondents also talked of the importance of mentors and in school adult educators. Some research has looked at good practice in schools for developing local teachers capacity to co-deliver English and other learning areas, and this work provides an important template for further workforce development in schools (Bowman et al., 1999; Wilkinson & Bradbury, 2013). For a local teachers role as first language teachers to be realised, or indeed any other leadership role, productive, respectful partnerships between local and non-local staff are key, as the school principal generally sets priorities in the school and

the non-local teacher generally controls the classroom timetable. Language programs also benefit from professional learning meetings with and across language groups.

In our study, concern was raised about the competing commitments that many local educators have impacting, at times, on their attendance at work, and with frustration from non-local teachers, which often slipped into blame. Constructive principals identified the need to be very clear about maintaining positive relationships, breaking down 'us and them' discourses and the need for flexible budgeting and employment arrangements. Such moves could allow a pool of staff to be employed, taking into account likely absences while still having access to staffing budgets. A number of principals were very creative in collaborations with outside projects and funding sources to have as many local staff employed in the school.

This links to a further strong theme in our research results- the importance of community members being actively involved with the school and providing essential links between home and school. Investment in employing local staff in a range of roles is a very positive way to achieve meaningful community engagement, with a range of spin offs including attendance and grades, the results of another study we have carried out of the available quantitative data (Guenther & Disbray, submitted).

Teaching English as an Additional Language or Dialect

English language teaching and learning is fundamental for classroom instruction and success in learning, and is essential to becoming literate in English which is the means of measuring achievement in education (Angelo, 2012, 2013a; McTaggart, 2010). Classroom teachers are the key source of English language instruction for students in remote and very remote schools and yet EAL/D qualifications are not a prerequisite for recruitment. Without specialist training, the necessary language awareness for both the local language setting, English language structures and features, second language teaching practice, and understanding of the language, learning needs of EAL/D learners are simply not in their teachers tool kit (Angelo & Carter, 2015). The Australian Council of TESOL Associations has just released the *'Elaborations of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers for use when working with learners of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D)'* (2015). Linked to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, undated) this resource can help teachers, schools and systems understand what this tool kit is.

In addition, there is a critical lack of articulated programs or approaches mandated or promoted in schools that support language teaching and learning in remote schools, though such material does exist (Angelo & Carter, 2015; Department of Education Western Australia and Department of Training and Workforce Development, 2012; McTaggart & Curro, 2009; Murray, 2015). The considerable attention to and resourcing of 'compensatory skills approaches' (Beresford & Gray, 2012, pp. 143-147) such as Direct Instruction do not fill this gap, as these isolate literacy skills from language development, when language development is a pre-requisite for literacy and not the other way around.

The newly developed NT DoE ESL (English as a Second Language) Policy and Guidelines are strong documents, but without professional learning, programs supportive of EAL/D practice and mandating these, student EAL/D needs are unlikely to be met. Professional learning networks here are essential.

Finally, while cultural awareness may be built into the graduate teacher standards, language teaching is a different and specialist task and requires technical knowledge. Culture awareness and responsive curriculum are important, but must be understood separately to language teaching and learning, otherwise they risk being a distraction from the task of teaching and learning a second language, and literacy in this language.

Partnerships: Who are educators?

Partnerships can open the range of non-teacher educators, and collaborations with teachers can provide ways to develop and deliver contextualised curriculum, embed and acknowledge local knowledge, identity and history. In another paper, Sam Osborne discussed the potential to draw on the range of experts and specialist knowledge in communities, ie local people with language, cultural and ecological knowledge, and non-local health professionals, legal advisors, anthropologists, scientists and rich learning spaces such as art centres and ranger programs, in the context of what we have called a ‘Red Dirt Curriculum’ (Osborne et al., 2014).

Indeed in some of the schools we surveyed, investment in relationships with organisations outside of the school was rewarded, with students visiting and learning in art centres, and local organisations such as ranger groups, often under the auspices of local Land Councils. Part of the well-documented ‘Learning on Country’ programs are meaningful and productive partners to schools programs, providing logistic support, specialist scientific learning and based on local arrangements (Fogarty, 2013; Fogarty & Schwab, 2012). There are a number of innovative, locally-contextualised place-based projects. In Central Australia, Tangentyere Council and CSIRO partner with remote schools to undertake local environmental science programs through the Land and Learning Program (Mooney, 2010). At Maningrida in the Northern Territory, a collaboration between the school, the local Djelk rangers and The Australian Venom Research Unit (AVRU), part of the Department of Pharmacology at the University of Melbourne, students are taking part in developing health and ecological knowledge resources, through project-based learning on country activities (Webb, Godinho, Woolley, & Winkel, 2013).

A note on recruitment and pre-service programs

While the focus of this paper is workforce development, some comments on recruitment and pre-service training are warranted. We interviewed a number of participants with experience of pre-service teacher placements in remote settings. These non-local teachers had first visited a remote school as pre-service teachers, or had hosted students. By their accounts, when well supported by the candidate’s university, the school and the department, these were reported to be effective in preparing and attracting suitable graduates to remote settings, particularly because they are place-based learning experiences (Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Lavery, Cain, & Hampton, 2014).

Some further elements of pre-service training are also pertinent. In line with the discussion above, pre-service training in many universities includes courses on teaching in EAL/D, and this skill set should be essential to recruitment to teaching positions in remote contexts. With respect to the AITSIL Standards, in response to the inclusion in the Teacher Standards of Focus Areas 1.4: ‘Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ and 2.4: ‘Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians’, a number of universities have developed units and modules for pre-service teaching programs (Anderson & Atkinson, 2013; Chigeza & Whitehouse, 2012; Monash University, Edith Cowan University, & Charles Sturt University, 2013). Such programs are important preparation, but local, placed-based learning and practice are necessary to connect theory and practice on the ground. Programs such as the Yolngu studies program offer important learning opportunities, are two-way and place value on local knowledge. Such programs seek to link learners to Aboriginal people on country and build place-based partnerships, albeit in the case of the Yolngu studies program, online through a virtual meeting space. And once again, EAL/D training is essential to meet the language learning needs of students in remote schools.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have drawn together results and recommendations from the RES project under the theme of ‘schools as sites for Learning Partnerships’ to explore ways to develop the workforce best suited to remote schools. The research with local and non-local educators and community members has focussed attention on a number of inter-related points: the importance of teacher and system expertise in English language teaching and learning; the need for contextually responsive teaching and learning; and the value of local partnerships.

In developing these proposals, we have not assumed that these are easy or underestimate the workloads and pressures of staff in remote schools. We are well aware of the frustration that both local and non-local staff face in trying to implement, change or maintain practice they are committed to in the schools they work in. However, the findings from the study and the proposals we have made are not in conflict with the points raised and goals set in the NT Indigenous Education Strategy (Northern Territory Government, 2015) or the Closing the Gap strategy, but they do put the emphasis back on local contexts and local aspirations for education.

Finally, we agree with Chenhall and colleagues (Chenhall, Holmes, Lea, Senior, & Wegner, 2011) that schools cannot be held solely responsible for undoing compounding regimes of inequity in wider society, however they can respond better to the goals and aspirations of remote Aboriginal people.

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