The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education
Volume 42 ▮ Number 2 ▮ pp. 111–122 ▮ © The Authors 2013 doi 10.1017/jie.2013.19

Red Dirt Thinking on Power, Pedagogy and Paradigms: Reframing the Dialogue in Remote Education

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Recent debates in Australia, largely led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island academics over the past 5 or so years, have focused on the need for non-Indigenous educators to understand how their practices not only demonstrate lack of understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, but even deny their presence. This debate has serious implications for the non-Indigenous remote educator who wishes to support remote students to achieve 'success' through their education. The debates on the one hand advocate the decolonising of knowledge, pedagogy and research methods in order to promote more just or equal approaches to research and education, while other voices continue to advocate the pursuit of mainstream dominant Western 'outcomes' as the preferred goal for Indigenous students across Australia. This dilemma frames the context for this study. The Remote Education Systems Project, in the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, seeks to explore these and other questions as part of the broader research agenda being undertaken. This project is particularly focused on large-scale questions such as: 'What is a remote education for and what would 'success' look like in the remote education context?' We are approaching these research questions from community standpoints and perspectives as a critical starting point for these types of debates and discussions. In doing so, our findings indicate that remote Aboriginal community members have a strong sense of western education and its power to equip young people with critical skills, knowledge and understandings for the future, but also a strong sense of retaining of their 'own' knowledge, skills and understanding. This presents a complex challenge for educators who are new to this knowledge interface. Here, we offer the concept of 'Red Dirt Thinking' as a new way to position ourselves and engage in situated dialogue about what remote schooling might be if it took into account power issues around Indigenous knowledges in the current policy context. This article questions whether remote communities, schools and systems have, in fact, taken account of the knowledge/power debates that have taken place at an academic level and considers how remote education might consider the implications of stepping outside the 'Western–Indigenous binary'. It seeks to propose new paradigms that non-Indigenous educators may need to engage in order to de-limit the repositioning of power-laden knowledge and pedagogies offered in remote classrooms.

■ **Keywords:** remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, power, pedagogy, A<u>n</u>angu education, educational policy, paradigms

When we think of innovation, we have come to know the concept of 'blue sky' thinking, where we are able to dream about what might be possible without limitation or constraint, to let our ideals loose into the realms of possibility. As researchers in the Remote Education Systems Project, in the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP), we commit to deep thinking and imagining as we conceptualise our collaborative research focus in remote Australia. This may be considered to be blue sky thinking, but as we look to the pragmatic task of taking a first step, actioning the thinking, it is the red dirt beneath the feet that beckons an impression.

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A key concern for us is how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations, needs and aspirations. We hope to identify models and strategies that can improve learning outcomes for students to increase opportunities for engagement in meaningful livelihoods such as employment and/or social and community engagement beyond school. A key focus of the project is to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints in the research in order to inform actions and recommendations for systemic change.

In proposing the concept of 'red dirt' thinking, it is our intention to inform *action* in the remote education context. We hope to 'interrupt' (Ainscow, 2005) established ways of thinking about the dialogue of power and pedagogy, systemic 'failings' and 'educational disadvantage'. As Boomer (1999) suggests, in order to shift disadvantaged students from the margins of educational disadvantage, 'pragmatic radical' educators must hold a sense of the utopian (blue sky) in one hand, but retain a firm grasp on the pragmatic (red dirt) in the other.

This article will examine the debate about the delivery of socially just (powerful) education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote Australia. Nakata, Nakata, Keech, and Bolt (2012), for example, call for a revisiting of the anti-colonial critique in preparing teachers for a profession in educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, whereas other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, such as Rigney (1999), advocate the need to prioritise Indigenist positions and methods, for example, to reverse the long history of exclusionary and unequal approaches to education.

In taking account of this debate, the aim of this article is to consider the implications and relevance for the remote Australian context and to propose approaches and key questions for improved practice and innovation in relation to delivering a more 'successful' education for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The paper draws on emerging data from the Remote Education Systems project (within the CRC-REP) and highlights further questions and challenges we wish to address across the life of the project. It is part of a collection of papers presented on the theme 'Red Dirt Thinking'.

As part of the Remote Education Systems project, although still in the early stages, we have adopted a range of approaches to gather community standpoints on these questions of education and the knowledge contest that schools, communities and educators face. This has taken place through workshops, focus groups, training and employing Aboriginal community researchers to conduct community interviews in local Aboriginal languages, the development of academic conversations and subsequent publications with remote Aboriginal educators, and also by working with non-Indigenous educators and leaders to bring a fuller understanding on the perspectives and challenges that exist.

The first section of the article presents the clash of values and views that is played out in remote schooling contexts, outlining a range of diverse views from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island education leaders, as well as the more visible tensions in educating remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in western schooling systems.

Following that, we discuss the broader systemic discourse about performance and the apparent failure of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools in Australia. We also discuss the philosophical underpinnings of the broadly accepted notions and values of mainstream schooling, highlighting the power inequities that exist within this ideological frame.

We then raise the problem of a binarised approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and outline some useful perspectives from Delpit (1993) and Nakata et al. (2012) that inform a more mature, nuanced sense of engaging the complex intercultural spaces of remote education from a 'red dirt', or place-based perspective.

The next section highlights the knowledge debate as it reappears in the remote employment dialogue, and we present a range of views from remote Aboriginal perspectives emerging from the Remote Education Systems research and the relevant literatures. Finally, we propose some broad questions for discussion that are emerging from early findings in the Remote Education Systems project.

The Contested Knowledge Space

Nakata (2007b) describes the 'cultural interface' as the point at which western (or scientific) and Indigenous knowledge intersects. As Nakata describes, in preparing teachers for teaching Australian and, in particular, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, there is a great enthusiasm for including, highlighting and harmonising Indigenous knowledge within the curriculum, with the intention to validate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, histories, stories and knowledge as valued and worthwhile in Australian classrooms. As Nakata suggests, this concept, although well intentioned, can be problematic in that:

> *In their differences, Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific ones are considered so disparate as to be 'incommensurable' (Verran, 2005) or 'irreconcilable'. (Russel, 2005, p. 8)*

As Nakata (2007b) and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics highlight (see, e.g., Arbon, 2008; Ford, 2010), Indigenous epistemologies, cosmologies, ontologies and axiologies are almost diametrically opposed in their essence to the values and neoliberal assumptions that underpin western education and society more broadly (see Guenther & Bat, 2012). In the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island context, this is expressed in a range

of ways, including collective ontology (as opposed to the value of individualism that underpins western, neoliberal society), relationship structures that are far more expansive than a nuclear family structure and are ordered through reciprocal obligations and social norms that are dictated by traditional law/lore. The relationship to land is also at odds with that of western concepts of land ownerships and its 'purpose'. The land (or 'country', as it is often referred to) weaves together the concepts of identity, belonging and social order. It forms the foundation of religious belief, social history and epistemology. Land formations bear witness to and are the evidence of the ancient and eternal presence of the ancestor beings.

It is important here to emphasise that despite the fact that we are referring to 'remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities', each cultural, geographic and linguistic context has different elements, belief structures, ways of working and values, so there is no single "Indigenous" ontology or epistemology, although there are commonalities. This is made more complex with stolen generations of children, brought up away from country and kin, and numbers of people living in city or provincial towns due to a myriad of historical factors which may also include seeking opportunities for employment, formal education and economic independence. This presents a high degree of complexity for those preparing to work in remote community schools as there is no 'handbook' of 'what to know', only the need to take account of the certainty that, as Nakata (2007b), Arbon (2008) and Ford (2010) remind educators, it cannot be assumed that remote communities will share the same values and world views as mainstream contexts. This dynamic is discussed further in this article as we discuss implications for education systems, employment models and the work of remote educators.

In the fervour to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, knowledge and values into the existing frame of western education, new challenges emerge for educators who wish to engage at the cultural interface in taking account of the complex historical, social and political elements that underpin Indigenous knowledge and the communities that encompass the education context. Squeezing mandated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into a teacher's tick box 'to do list', for example, renders 'Indigenous knowledge' disembodied from the 'knowers', 'dislocated . . . from its locale' and 'separated from the social institutions that uphold and reinforce its efficacy.' (Nakata 2007b, p. 9) This raises a legitimate question for educators as to how they might fulfil their obligations to meet curriculum requirements in relation to Indigenous knowledge and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives without relegating this knowledge and the 'knowers' to a position that seems trivial or some sort of unavoidable nuisance in an already 'crowded curriculum'. At the broader level, committed educational leaders see the need for education to provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to strengthen their own identity and build a sense of purpose in pursuing the more easily recognised outcomes education offers, such as literacy and numeracy skills, high school completion and moving into further education or employment; but where to begin?

Nakata (2007a) also points out that multiple Indigenous standpoints exist and therefore to expect a neat handbook of homogenised Indigenous knowledge, values and perspectives to include in the established curriculum is naïve and misunderstands the point that the construction of shared knowledge and the privileging of Indigenous knowledge in formal school settings will always be a joint, developmental process. Further, as (white) educators seeking to be guided by Indigenous standpoints and leaders, we must recognise that the universal application of a single approach is also unlikely to be satisfactory in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. One only needs to examine recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in the debate as to what knowledge and values should be prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools to understand how diverse the positions, values and lived experiences are among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and academics and what they suggest is most important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (see Rowse, 2012).

Pearson (2009), for example, cautions against focusing on what he calls self-esteem building practices and argues that the pursuit of 'serious' knowledge is the key. In doing so, he takes the position that in contexts where traditional language and 'serious' cultural practices have been diminished, or indeed, extinguished through historical injustices, education should not seek to empower a 'middle' existence where engagement with western education, knowledge and employment is resisted on grounds of 'culture'. Instead, he suggests patterns of low employment, alcoholism and violence as a form of 'altered' Indigenous identity must be confronted and the pursuit of 'serious' education (in either knowledge system) adopted. This position strongly advocates young people leaving home, if necessary, to acquire the skills and education that underpin career-focused individual achievement.

Anderson (2012) echoed some of these sentiments in her inaugural address to the Northern Territory parliament as the new Minister for Indigenous Advancement, encouraging the pursuit of an education 'like everyone else in Australia': 'So what is the problem? . . . If we taught our kids the same way kids are taught in Newcastle and Fremantle, their results would skyrocket (p. 4)'

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics such as Rigney (1999) have come to adopt a more activist approach to reversing unequal education outcomes by advocating the decolonisation of knowledge and power in research methodologies, echoing similar calls from other international indigenous academics such as Smith (1999) in what Nakata et al. (2012) call the 'anti-colonial critique'. Sarra (2011) advocates an alternative approach to

the concern of improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, arguing that Indigenous people have agency and must take control of their own emancipation and resist the 'othered' position afforded them by mainstream Australia, rather than resisting the education system as such.

The diverse range of voices and positions are in no way harmonised or homogenous in the debate about what an 'effective' education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students looks like. Neither is there consensus as to whether Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages, cultural practices and values should have room made for them in a schooling context or not. Perhaps the only thread that unites the voices is the commitment and passion to improve things for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Nakata et al. (2012) suggest that the knowledge debate demands 'a much more measured and complex analysis' than the 'simplistic oppositional analysis between Indigenous and Western knowledge epistemologies as the antithesis of each other' (p. 127).

Further, Nakata et al. (2012) propose that universities resist the 'shock and awe' approach to bringing (non-Indigenous) educators to the point of engaging with the de-colonial position and instead, to teach:

> *... the practice of 'suspension' viz., suspension of presuppositions and suspension of foregone conclusions while engaging the implications of the knowledge interface for Indigenous analysis, Indigenous resistance, Indigenous knowledge revitalisation, Indigenous practices and Indigenous futures. (p. 135)*

Education Performance, Policy, Philosophy and Power

In developing a picture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and the debates that exist, it is important for educators to consider the wider debates, such as what policy-makers and other academics are saying about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. In recent months, at the national education policy level, some important issues have been raised. These issues focus at the national system level on trying to lift the standards of 'disadvantaged' people, particularly those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who come from remote parts of Australia. Inevitably, the discourse is one of failure, gaps and deficits and the need to close the gaps, raise the standards and fix the problems.

The Australian government commissioned a report known as the 'Gonski review' (Gonski et al., 2011) to examine what would be needed to fund an improved and 'world-class' education system in Australia. They found a 'growing gap' in terms of educational outcomes between mainstream Australians and those from low socio-economic and Indigenous backgrounds. In particular, they recognised that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities remain most 'disadvantaged' in educational terms.

More recently, a review of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy) testing was conducted (ACARA, 2012) and this review restates the point that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly remote Northern Territory students are most 'behind' in nationally tested literacy and numeracy results. In response, Peter Garrett, federal minister for schools was interviewed shortly after the report's release and made the following remarks:

> *It's unacceptable for us as a nation to have these gaps, whether it's between Indigenous Australians or not, finishing high school as much as three or four years behind their counterparts in suburban or city schools. It's absolutely unacceptable for us to have such a big gap between kids from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from better off backgrounds in terms of their educational attainment. And if we want to prosper in the 21st century, all our kids need to have an excellent education. (Garrett, 2012)*

Minister Garrett's summation that NAPLAN results are closely correlated to the level of the parents' education is well supported in studies around the world that confirm that standardised test results are more an indication of the socio-economic status of the family as opposed to a measure of whether students are intelligent, or the relative worth of individual teachers (Klenowski, 2009; OECD, 2010; Schütz, West, & Wößmann, 2007; Robinson, 2009).

So where does this discourse come from? It comes from a set of assumptions about what a good education is and what it should be for. These assumptions are built on the foundations of ancient Greek and western philosophers and are generally taken axiomatically as givens. For example, while education happens in the social setting of school, academic success is attributed to individuals. The focus on individualism has its roots in Greek philosophy and perhaps more so in Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant and Rousseau, who emphasise individual autonomy and individual freedom (for a discussion of the historical development of philosophies of education see Carr, 2010). The argument of liberalist education philosophers suggests that 'schools should encourage competition between individual students and prepare students to live independent lives in society, respecting their uniqueness and distinct capabilities' (Portelli & Menashy, 2010, p. 421). The 20th-century educationalist, John Dewey saw the purpose of education as an end in itself, for 'growth' (Noddings, 2012, p. 39). While this is to some extent an individualistic process, Dewey (1938) does acknowledge the need for mechanisms of 'social control' in education, though he tends to view these as 'indirect ... not direct or personal ... not external and coercive' (Dewey, 1966, p. 39). While many might cringe at the thought of indoctrination, the role of school in the socialisation of individuals to conform to the accepted norms of the

prevailing society is acknowledged (Bailey, 2010), as its function in building social capital (Coleman, 1990). Its function in building economic capacity is also well documented among economists. Economists Oreopoulos and Sylvanes (2011) identify a range of what they term 'non-pecuniary' benefits of schooling: 'Schooling generates occupational prestige. It reduces the chance of ending up on welfare or unemployed' (p. 179).

The various goals of a good education (and there are more than those listed above) have become embedded in the system in such a way as to ultimately narrowly frame what should and should not happen in school. In pragmatic terms a distillation of the above philosophical, sociological, psychological and economic foundations leads to the belief that a good education is about funnelling individuals into a worldview dominated by individualistic competitiveness, which in turn coerces students to submit to a dominant hegemony that values wealth and the power with which it is coupled. The 'gap' when viewed through this lens, is a product of the failure of students and their families to buy into the paradigms of hegemonic (sometimes referred to as 'the mainstream') power.

Reframing the Dialogue

The remote educator seeking to be informed and invest his/her energies into 'making a difference' has the unenviable task of knowing where to begin. Against the discourse nationally about 'gaps' and 'failures' for remote students, the opinions and voices as to how to respond seem to collide in a cataclysmic cacophony of maddening 'expert' advice. I don't know how many times I (Sam) have received what I have come to call 'free lectures' about 'the answer to all things Aboriginal' from service station attendants, waitresses and the bourgeois brotherhood (small business owners) of Alice Springs. Anywhere you care to loiter for more than 10 seconds, you are fair game to have someone download an expert opinion about 'them'. I remember holidaying in the limestone coast in South Australia one year and a fellow BBQ-er asked where I was from. When I explained that I was working in a remote school, he asked: 'So what's the answer?' I replied: 'What's the question?' 'Good point', he responded and spent the rest of the cooking time sipping quietly from his beer with a faraway look in his eye. The conversation was over. How does an inspired or inspiring educator answer the 'red-dirt' question of 'So where do I start?' Perhaps their first act of resistance is the determination to avoid the easy answers dialogue.

Nakata et al. (2012) make a powerful and logical case in arguing a move away from the 'binary' discourse about Indigenous-western relations and in recognising the complexity of the space, they propose that:

> *students might be more disposed to understanding the limits of their own thinking by engaging in open, exploratory and creative inquiry in these difficult intersections, while building language and tools for describing and analysing what they engage with. This approach engages the politics of knowledge production and builds critical skills. (p. 121)*

And further:

> *Pedagogically, we propose this as a way to also prevent slippage into forms of thinking and critical analysis that are confined within dichotomies between primitivism and modernity; and as a way to avoid the closed-mindedness of intellectual conformity, whether this be expressed in Indigenous, decolonial or Western theorising. (p. 121)*

In essence, they argue that the way we as educators position ourselves to build new language, explore and inquire is the only way we may enable a new and creative educational space that both honours and amplifies the historical context, its disciplines and values, and also opens a creative and dynamic space for a re-imagining of the possibilities and hope the future holds for remote students. This is more than 'whitefellas talking with (or about) blackfellas' (to use the central Australian vernacular) and by reframing the binary paradigm, a new potential for imagining education emerges. As highlighted by the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander points of view on education, educators must understand the national debates and the systemic priorities being presented, critically reflect on their own 'complicity with colonialism' (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 121) in their role as educators, take account of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and priorities in the public domain and *then* begin the real task of engaging with the complex knowledge and structures that exist within the communities they arrive in to teach. In committing to the acquisition and sharpening of the tools outlined earlier, educators have already moved beyond the limitation of a binary dialogue.

Delpit (1993) calls for an 'un-silencing' of the 'power-laden' (Haraway, 2004) dialogue that exists in education systems where classrooms mirror western social norms ('the culture of power') and ultimately redistribute social and educational inequality. This requires remote education systems, schools and educators to reframe the binary paradigm of 'us and them', 'remote or urban', 'Western or Indigenous', or 'failing or normal/proper schools' in the remote education context, engaging in a process that explicitly teaches the implicit social norms and logic of the curriculum and the knowledge system that underpins educational success.

In responding to Nakata et al.'s (2012) invitation for educators to explore beyond the binary of colonial or anti-colonial paradigms, a significant challenge is thrown down to those educators engaging at the knowledge interface. How might we (as non-Indigenous educators) take account of the complex, contested and diverse voices and standpoints that exist in communities and also at the national level in order to unlock a future-directed imagining

in young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders through education that rises above the social dysfunction that Pearson (2009) describes, but resists the neo-colonial urgings of the mainstream, neoliberal narrative?

If we were to revisit the 'Red Dirt Thinking' proposition, the conversation would not be constrained by the blue sky dreaming of the national education system, which dreams of an apparent utopia where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are 'equal' with their non-Indigenous counterparts — and yet fails to deliver despite the funds being poured in to 'fix the problem'. The red dirt approach would perhaps take an approach which (a) sees learning and educational success defined in the local rather than the national, (b) looks to find ways of building aspiration to achieve that success, and (c) develops strategies accordingly.

Remotely Speaking; Policies, Priorities and Paradigms

High order skills for engaging at the knowledge interface are indeed essential underpinnings of successful practice in remote education, if for no other reason than to simply 'stay', rather than 'exit the encounter' (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 136). In remote terms, Gonski (2011), ACARA (2012) and Garrett (2012) reinforce the message that things are 'failing' or at best, 'behind'. State and territory governments urge principals, teachers, families and communities to improve attendance and increase the number of children attaining (minimal) benchmarks in English language literacy and numeracy, early childhood engagement, student retention and pathways to employment (see, e.g., AARD DPC, 2012; Northern Territory Government, 2012). Given the national attention to educational failure in remote schools and the nature of sparse resourcing in desert communities (see Stafford-Smith & Huigen, 2009), systems tend to focus on fewer priorities and increase the downward pressure to improve these key areas, resulting in remotely located educators being given firm directives to address the key focus areas, often to the detriment of other aspects of schooling that can be critical for the social and academic development of young people. Areas of a remote education that can be 'de-prioritised' by the system (often enacted by highly stressed middle management) can include the arts, language, sports, and other local community priorities, such as intergenerational cultural engagement, and consideration of how schools may or may not interrelate with cultural activities such as funerals, ceremonies and so on. An example of this pressure was evident as the then Minister for Indigenous Advancement in the Northern Territory Parliament, Alison Anderson (2012), urged the reproduction of urban classrooms ('proper schools') in remote communities to cause results to 'skyrocket' through 'real' (p. 5) education and realise the dream of a 'real job' (p. 7). She stated: 'One of the things we have to do to make schools normal is introduce normal curriculum just as they have in Melbourne, London, or New York (p. 5)'.

One of the problems with the 'normal school' proposition is that the results hoped to 'skyrocket' are attendance, NAPLAN, student retention and transitions to further training or employment. Some of the more dynamic aspects of remote community life and interests reside in context specific knowledge ('on country') such as ecological knowledge, the arts, intergenerational engagement with these knowledges and practices, local languages, sporting interests and so on. While these can all be incorporated into the 'normal' curriculum, they are not the results that are being scrutinised. An over-emphasis on the 'basic skills' aspects of 'normal education' limits remote educators in their sense of liberty to explore the broader aspects of school curriculum, as well as the less understood (certainly less measured) social learning aspects an education necessarily entails. Undoubtedly, a host of 'normal (metropolitan) schools' would love to have access to the rich and diverse community assets that remote communities possess to incorporate into their 'normal' schooling program, without holding a sense that these assets are the reason for 'educational failure' and are therefore to be distanced from the schooling experience if students are to 'succeed'.

At Yulara, The ILC (Indigenous Land Corporation — an independent statutory authority of the Australian Government) — purchased the Ayer's Rock Resort situated in the heart of central Australia and agreed to take on high stakes Australian Government contracts to deliver 300 Indigenous training and employment positions. This has been widely reported and publicised as the solution to employment for local communities (see Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012; *Alice Springs News*, 2011), but since the purchase of the Resort, very few Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people) have found their way to employment in the Resort, and conversely, very few people from the Resort have found their way to engaging with Anangu. Instead, vacant positions, including dance groups, cultural induction programs and internal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are (almost exclusively) filled by people from the coastal fringe of the nation. Not only are education systems seemingly 'looking for superman' (Guenther, 2012) to improve remote schools, but employers such as the ILC seem to also be looking for 'remote superman' to arrive at the door asking for a 'real job' in a 'job-ready' state. As Guenther and Boyle (2013) highlight, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment growth is evident in remote communities, this is largely bolstered by FIFO (Fly In, Fly Out) employment populations in the mining and construction sectors, rather than reflecting growth in local remote community members getting a 'real' job.

While large-scale government and corporate employment strategies develop a rhetoric about local employment targets, upon coming to a realisation that this

requires a long-term commitment to community development, they more often than not retreat to 'Indigenous, but not local' employment targets, or simply abandon the targets altogether. In such situations, corporations limit local engagement to things such as inviting local people to perform a 'welcome to country' (which is not a part of Aṉangu cultural traditions or practice as it may be with other Aboriginal language groups) or using photos of local sites and community members to garnish their business related publications. Employers in remote contexts, as with educators, could also benefit from reflection on how to reframe the binary dialogue and better engage at the knowledge interface of the local remote community context in order to unlock new employment possibilities.

Both in preparing remote educators and remote young people for being 'job-ready', the simple principle of sowing and reaping applies. It is unreasonable to expect remote educators to have high degrees of skill at the knowledge interface without applying the kind of pedagogical approach that Nakata et al. (2012) recommend. It is also unlikely that remote young people will pursue externally centred (and imagined) job and training opportunities without significant investment in building confidence and providing layers of experiences, supports and successes to scaffold the skills and implicit understandings about the world of work that are required to succeed. Perhaps this point is best supported in the continuing strong employment figures for local community members in the more familiar sectors of education, health and community level administration (see Guenther & Boyle, 2013).

As Lingard, Hayes, Mills, and Christie (2003) point out, education revolves around learning that is both social and academic. It may well benefit remote education systems to pay more attention to the social skills and socialisation experiences that young people require in order to confidently engage in the 'world of work' and to understand the value systems that underpin the implicit understandings of this 'world'. Delpit (1993) calls these the implicit 'codes of power'and argues that students who have not grown up within the culture of power need the implicit social aspects of western education and the social context it sits within to be made explicit in order for them to acquire the codes of power and confidently engage in both the social and academic aspects of education.

So, in the current dialogue about remote education, the question must be asked: 'Is the choice as stark and binary as either "failing", or "normal" (Anderson, 2012)'? What do remote people say about remote education and the knowledge interface for their own context?

In 2011, Wearne and Yunupingu published a report summarising views from parents and communities across five Arnhem Land (Yolngu) communities. Here, they summarise what they term 'clear and unequivocal views regarding education' (p. 5) as expressed by participants. They include:

- *Children need to be competent in both western and Yolngu teachings. Yolngu culture is paramount and western education must be embedded in a learning context that respects and affirms traditional Yolngu cultural knowledge, traditions and practices.*
- *Mainstream education at all levels is essential if Yolngu children are to have the same life chances as other Australians.*
- *A culture of genuine partnership between school, parents, communities and NT DET [Northern Territory Department of Education] is highly valued by parents. (p. 5)*

Immediately, the complex knowledge space is restated, highlighting the challenge of educational equality and access to mainstream education, but firmly laying this claim within the bounds of Yolngu knowledge traditions. Clearly, these Yolngu communities demand a complex engagement with education and educators, understanding the need for engagement with the western–Indigenous knowledge binary, but rejecting the limitation of an 'either/or' position. There is a sense in which a good education will enable those from non-western backgrounds to straddle the cultural divide (Guenther, Gurruwiwi, & Donohoe, 2010).

Makinti Minutjukur, PYEC (Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee) director, outlines her desire to see Aṉangu young people pursue the power that a mainstream education offers, but not at the expense of the power they currently hold (Minutjukur & Osborne, 2012). She also acknowledges that the power and identity Aṉangu have always held must undergo a cultural reinvention in order to survive and make meaning in the modern context, without altering the essential underpinning values.

Katrina Tjitayi, APY (Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara) lands School Improvement Coordinator, describes the image of remote education to be like a self-build chair that looks robust and complete (Tjitayi & Osborne, 2012), but in the absence of a few small, but important screws which she identifies as the 'codes of power' (Delpit, 1993), under weight, the chair breaks and cannot perform the function that it is built for. She describes at length the incredible importance of building confidence in Aṉangu children as learners from a young age and frames a number of stories within a perspective that Aṉangu education is strengthening and improving, but sees a need to consider how to ensure the critical underpinnings of a robust education can produce a 'chair that holds under weight', as opposed to the position that 'we're failing'.

Rueben Burton is the Aṉangu Coordinator at Amata Aṉangu School and emphasises that Piṟanpa (white) educators must understand that aspiration and imagined futures (Nakata, 2007a) are not viewed through the lens of the Piṟanpa teacher, but through that of significant family members (Burton & Osborne, 2012). He describes his

own long journey to acquiring some sense of mastery of western knowledge and that through this struggle, he has developed a language for each experience, which then can be handed to his children for their future. In this sense, it would be unusual to expect a remote child to seriously aspire to abstract concepts such as that of a mainstream professional with all of the values, assumptions, motivations and disciplines required for 'making sense' of this context, unless they have observed and normalised these habits in their own thinking and experience.

Everything Old is New Again

> *All students come to Indigenous Studies ill-prepared for the knowledge and political contests they will encounter. How students are positioned to engage in these contests has everything to do with whether they will stay with or exit the encounter. How they are brought to the encounter has everything to do with whether they resist, oppose, defend, convert, patronise, tolerate or thoughtfully engage the content of their courses to the best of their ability. (Nakata et al., 2012 p. 136)*

In the sense that Nakata et al. (2012) call for a more mature and nuanced engagement at the knowledge interface, we are proposing some key questions for consideration that have arisen from research activities in the APY (Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara) lands in the far north west of South Australia and the southern region of the Northern Territory. None of these questions are new; in fact, they are probably the very same questions that have vexed every educator who has ever worked in remote education. However, these are the questions that community members and Aṉangu educators have wanted to discuss as we have begun the research activities in the region.

How Can Educators Inspire a Sense of 'Aspiration' and 'Hope' Through Education?

One of the 'myths' about Aboriginal societies is that there is no capacity for consideration of the future, only the present and the past. While there is some foundation for this summation, educators need to pay attention to what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are saying. Rueben Burton (Burton & Osborne, 2012) emphasises that for young Aṉangu, aspiration and a sense of the future is inspired (and handed to them) through one's own family, and (white) educators need to understand the limitations of their influence in this regard. This has serious implications for Aṉangu families and their responsibility to their children, but also requires educators to be more complex in their considerations of how they may enable a sense of aspiration that is not limited by the constraints of what may be seen now, but does not assume to cleave young people from the basis of their identity and sense of self in order to 'achieve' this outcome. This dynamic is observed the world over (see Ainscow, 2012) where children of low economic social status face the complex challenges that education, hope, aspiration and the assumptions that define 'success' present to them on a daily basis.

The 'dream' that teachers present to students must be more nuanced than the binary of neo-liberal aspiration and 'success' or consignment to 'failure' and 'nothingness', framed within the limitations of the educator's own experience. Makinti Minutjukur (Minutjukur & Osborne, 2012) is unambiguous in her belief in western education and its importance for her own family, but is at pains to point out that Aṉangu have their own power that should not be abandoned. In recognising that the ancient sensibilities of 'being Aṉangu' may no longer 'make any sense' (see Lear, 2006) in a modern neo-colonial context, Minutjukur argues that this Aṉangu identity must be retained, but reinvented in the pursuit of any sense of power that western education has to offer. This clear message is echoed by the five Yolngu communities represented in the Arnhem Land research cited earlier in Wearne & Yunupingu (2011). Nakata (2007a) highlights that the imagined future is critical for Indigenous young people in the education system and Pearson (2011) cites Lear (2006) in describing the 'radical hope' he calls for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to pursue: 'Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it'.

In an August 2012 workshop (personal notes), Makinti Minutjukur described the way that Aṉangu would travel in a line, with older family members forging a footprint in the sand and clearing prickles for the younger members to avoid. She highlighted the need for senior Aṉangu to lay footprints across the sand hills that the younger generation can step into, but also expressed her hope that the younger generation would go beyond the footprints that have been laid. Katrina Tjitayi described aspiration as essentially confined to the example of one's own family and described how seeing her mother's example as a committed educator inspired her and her siblings to envisage a career as an educator too. This was the experience across the Ernabella community where children followed careers under the modelling of their own family working in specific roles.

These are powerful and inspirational concepts, but highlight the complexities that committed remote educators must engage with. In reality, many families suffer the distinct absence of strong adults who are committed to the leaving of footprints for aspirational young people to follow and eventually, surpass. In community contexts where violence, substance abuse and social dysfunction can be confronting reminders for educators of the pragmatic nature of the challenges in educating for equality and hope (Pearson, 2009), the narrative of aspiration and inspiration can seem a bridge too far. Conversely, a remote educator who is unable to step outside the limitations of his/her own experience may completely miss the presence of such inspirational people and prematurely resign themselves to a 'hopeless cause'.

This of course raises a great question which demands further exploration: 'If Anangu view the future and aspiration through the lens of significant family members, how did the initial generation of well sinkers, teachers, shearers, health workers and church ministers come to a point of committing to these endeavours?' (see Osborne, 2012b).

How Can a Remote Educator Improve Their Teaching Practice in the Classroom AND Engage Deeply With Indigenous Knowledge(s) That Exist in the Community Context? Is it Possible? Is it a Good Idea?

Trust and relationships are good old fashioned terms that seem to have become unfashionable in the current remote education context. This could be partly because of the pressure to improve 'results' and the directive for teachers to present mainstream experiences to remote students, but is possibly also a symptom of a systemic aversion to the 'mung beans' (Northern Territory vernacular), or as Sutton (1988), perhaps unkindly describes, the 'hippy paparazzi grooving on dreamtime vibes' (p. 262). Remote schools tend to attract a cohort who seek to feel at 'one with the people' at an ideological level, but have a notorious reputation for lacking any sense of commitment or rigour in presenting western knowledge, values or self-disciplines as a critical element of the education experience. Non-Indigenous educators who come to remote communities to 'find themselves', so often find themselves in a mess. Finding the balance between maintaining a detached, 'professional distance' and engaging deeply in the community context where reciprocity and demand sharing can bring unsuspecting educators 'undone' is a critical issue that demands revisiting.

Katrina Tjitayi (Tjitayi & Osborne, 2012) describes the importance of confidence for children in Anangu schools. She argues that educators need to take account of the way an Anangu child feels in the learning context and that in teacher-student relationships where trust is high, students are likely to reciprocate by 'opening their spirit' to embracing new knowledge. She explains that while western descriptions of learning may be referred to in terms of the head or the heart, Anangu retain knowledge in their spirit. Tjitayi also calls on parents and extended families to play a critical role in this process of confidence building and learning, demanding a more complex understanding from educators as to their role and capacity in brokering the teaching relationship. Remote educators must have a deep sense of community values and ontologies if they are to enable a space for family members to actively involve themselves in the schooling process to build a sense of confidence in (particularly) young children as they embrace the new ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies that western education presents.

Is Learning (Local) Aboriginal Language(s) Worthwhile for Remote Educators?

In remote communities where English is a second, third or fourth language, families, schools and more broadly, systems have often resolved that educators should not engage with the local language(s) as this will distract them from their core task of modelling English language, a critical task given that students don't often hear English language outside of the classroom. This also removes the temptation to poorly model local language during school hours. This is understandable, but we are arguing here that engaging with the language of the community is an empowering tool for educators to begin to 'hear' (internalise or *kulini* — see Osborne, 2012a) the way people engage emotionally with language, each other and learning itself, which can inform their own teaching practice like nothing else. This process can also be a critical tool to reposition educators in the decolonised space where educators connect with the 'knowers', are co-located in the 'locale' of the knowledge and the 'knowers', and are dependent on the 'social institutions that uphold and reinforce its (the knowledge's) efficacy', immersing them in 'the practices that constantly renew its meanings in the here and now' (Nakata 2007b, p. 9). The pursuit of even a basic introduction to local language(s) demands a commitment to respectful relationships, an investment of time and the position of a learner in an inverse unequal (anti-colonial) power relationship context. This does not have to be something seen in opposition to an English literacy program, but can be an after-hours focus if communities are staunch 'English-only' supporters. Indeed, Pearson goes as far as to claim this as 'the worthiest cause for an Australian patriot':

> *If you don't know an indigenous Australian language, learn one. (People with no indigenous Australian family may learn the language of the area with which they have the strongest ties.) If you know an indigenous Australian language, improve your grasp of it; literacy in Australian languages is still rare. Then speak it to the children. This is the noblest and worthiest cause for an Australian patriot. (Pearson, 2011)*

Conclusion

Increasing focus on nationally compared data has created an increased pressure on remote schools (particularly in the Northern Territory) to improve the data that is most visible: attendance, literacy and numeracy benchmarks, retention and school completion figures. At the complex knowledge interface, the balance seems to have shifted more to the priorities of the 'colonised', or western values systems. This is despite strong emphasis from Indigenous academics, both nationally and internationally, on the pursuit of anticolonial or decolonised pedagogies and practice. In universities, Indigenous studies (according to Nakata et al., 2012) has commonly adopted the anticolonial critique, applying critical theory's 'great attraction' in

its promise to overcome 'dominant power relations' and deliver 'empowerment to Indigenous people' (p. 124). In contrast to teaching the resistance of western inscriptions and the taking up of Indigenous ones, Nakata et al. (2012) call for the upholding of: 'Indigenous resistance and reassertion by teaching students to think about the limits of current language and discourse for navigating the complexities of knowledge production' (p. 136).

Through presenting early data from the CRC-REP Remote Education Systems research project, it is clear that remote Aboriginal communities have not relinquished their epistemological priorities and bought into the binary narrative of prioritising western knowledge and values (success) or resigning to 'failure and hopelessness' (remote education as it currently stands condemned). Remote educators, more than ever, need to be equipped with tools for approaching the complex and contested knowledge interface in order to negotiate their way to paying attention to the social justice logic (closing the gap and ending 'disadvantage') that education offers, as well as understanding the limits of this thinking. How emerging educators are 'brought to the encounter', argues Nakata et al. (2012 p. 136) has everything to do with whether they 'resist, oppose, defend, convert, patronise, tolerate or thoughtfully engage'.

Nakata et al. (2012, p. 136), call for a more mature and nuanced preparation than the 'simplified decolonised framework' in preparing educators for work in the Indigenous education space. The key questions presented in this article are not going to be surprising to experienced remote educators. Remote communities haven't changed their epistemological or axiological spots and raced to the other side of the western-Indigenous binary, but it is becoming increasingly important for educators to revisit the knowledge interface and the questions that exist in their ambiguity and their (at times) irreconcilable condition. Revisiting these questions does, however, offer a moment's respite from the despair of the deficit discourse in the existing binarised national dialogue about the 'failure' of remote education.

Nakata et al. (2012, p. 121) make a great deal of sense when they call for students to: 'be disposed to understanding the limits of their own thinking by engaging in open, exploratory and creative enquiry in these difficult intersections, while building language and tools for describing and analysing what they engage with'.

Remote educators, more than ever, need to be well equipped for the complex challenges they will encounter. Perhaps we need to focus less on the highly visible 'problems' dialogue and pay far more attention to how we prepare educators to reframe the dialogue and free their thinking to inspire young people in remote schools to pursue a future worth 'slipping across the western-Indigenous binary' for. This requires educators and systems to reframe their thinking in terms of a place-based, or a 'red dirt' approach, privileging local voices, values, pedagogies and priorities in the education experience to reposition the power relationships and the relative value of local knowledge and cultures in the relationship.

In framing a remote education paradigm with western (and Greek) philosophical and theoretical boundaries it is almost impossible to see schooling as it is presently as anything more than a dismal, disempowering failure. Similarly, if education is seen through the mutually exclusive binaries of non-Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, cosmologies and axiologies and their corresponding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander philosophies, it is difficult to see beyond the apparent clash of the codes of power that operate separately and which are disconnected. Designing an education system built on either paradigm will inevitably require compromise and result in something of a hybridised version of one or the other. However, consistent with the views of Nakata et al. (2012) it may be possible instead to build a system that draws from a shared understanding of both western and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander philosophies, but which sits outside the mutually exclusive educational paradigms in something of a liminal space where new codes of power are effectively co-generated.

Acknowledgments

The work reported in this article was supported by funding from the Australian Government Cooperative Research Centres Program through the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP). The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the CRC-REP or Ninti One Limited or its participants. Errors or omissions remain with the author.

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