

# Red Dirt Education Leaders ‘Caught in the Middle’: Priorities for Local and Nonlocal Leaders in Remote Schools

John Guenther<sup>1</sup> and Samuel Osborne<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Division of Higher Education and Research, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Darwin, Northern Territory 0909, Australia

<sup>2</sup>School of Education, University of South Australia, Mawson Lakes, South Australia 5095, Australia

Schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote or ‘Red Dirt’ communities has been cast as ‘problematic’, and ‘failing’. The solutions to deficit understandings of remote schooling are often presented as simple. But for those who work in Red Dirt schools, the solutions are not simple, and for education leaders positioned between the local Red Dirt school and upward accountability to departments of education, they are complex. Between 2011 and 2016, the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation’s (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems project explored how education could better meet the needs of those living in remote communities. More than 1000 people with interests in remote education contributed to the research. Education leaders were identified as one stakeholder group. These leaders included school-based leaders, bureaucrats, community-based leaders and teacher educators preparing university graduates for Red Dirt schools. This paper focusses on what Red Dirt education leaders think is important for schooling. The findings show school leaders as ‘caught in the middle’ (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013) between expectations from communities, and of system stakeholders who drive policy, funding and accountability measures. The paper concludes with some implications for policy and practice that follow on from the findings.

■ **Keywords:** Red Dirt Thinking, remote education, principals, school leaders, red dirt education, Indigenous education

Schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote or ‘Red Dirt’ (Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2016) communities has been cast as ‘problematic’, and ‘failing’. The ‘problem’ is sometimes described in terms of students’ ‘poor’ academic performance (Hughes & Hughes, 2012). Sometimes, it is described as an attendance problem (NESA, 2017). At other times, it is a parental responsibility problem (Performance and Evaluation Branch, 2013), and often teacher quality (Lea, Tootell, Wolgemuth, Halkon, & Douglas, 2008) or ‘teaching methods’ (Anderson, 2012; Hughes & Hughes, 2012) are to blame for the ‘parlous state’ (Mackie, Shipway, Dutton, & MacLennan, 2016) of remote Indigenous education.

School leaders and the institutions they represent are less often targeted as the problem and more often highlighted as potential solutions (Davies, 2017). School leaders, for example, are seldom mentioned in the latest *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report where the role of school leaders in influencing student achievement is all but ignored except in relation to ‘unobserved’ contributions of

‘teacher and principal turnover’ and ‘Principal characteristics’ (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2016, p. 13.11). The recently released House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (2017) report titled *The Power of Education: From surviving to thriving*, similarly makes scant reference to the role of school principals in achieving positive outcomes for remote students.

However, the purpose of this paper is not to critique the role of school leaders in the remote education. Rather, it is to show what they think is important for remote schools in order to achieve better outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students—and how that compares with community perspectives. By ‘commu-

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: John Guenther, Division of Higher Education and Research, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Darwin, Northern Territory 0909, Australia.

Email: [John.guenther@batchelor.edu.au](mailto:John.guenther@batchelor.edu.au).

nity', we refer to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in or belong to the places we conducted our research in. We then consider implications for Red Dirt leaders and communities, with particular attention to the Northern Territory, which has about half of all very remote schools (with predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) in Australia (see Guenther, 2013). The data presented is based on findings from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems (RES) project, which ran between 2011 and 2016. The project's aim was to uncover ways that outcomes for students who come from remote communities could be improved. (See, for example, Guenther, Disbray, & Osborne, 2015, Guenther et al., 2016).

### Red Dirt Context

Remote Australian schools, which form the basis of the research presented here, in some ways look like other schools, with classrooms, teachers, students, curricula and a mix of other teaching and learning resources. There are differences though. While, on the one hand, they are by definition geographically 'remote'—a long way away from a capital city—the characteristic that makes them most different is their cultural location within communities where the ways of being (ontologies), valuing (axiologies), believing (cosmologies) and knowing (epistemologies) are starkly different from the philosophical assumptions embedded in school systems. These differences are often described as gaps or deficits, but if we were to view the education system from the 'Red Dirt', we would notice that it is the metropolitan that is remote (see, for example, Guenther, Halsey, & Osborne 2015), and we could see the disadvantage of teachers coming from their perceived places of privilege, not seeing or understanding how significantly cultural, local language and contextual factors shape the social and learning environment of schools and classrooms. 'Red Dirt' is simply a metaphor that positions 'remote' contexts as different, but not deficient or intrinsically disadvantaged (Osborne & Guenther, 2013).

### Historical and Policy Contexts

Schools in the Red Dirt of central and northern Australia, where much of our work has been carried out, have a relatively recent history. Government schools in remote parts of the Northern Territory were established from the 1950s, at least in part as a response to the policy of assimilation (Street et al., 2017). In the tri-state region (which includes parts of South Australia and Western Australia in addition to the Northern Territory), local community government schools were established from 1968 as people left mission centres and stations following the 1967 referendum (see Osborne, 2015). The abandonment of assimilation policy in favour of self-determination in the 1970s saw attempts to ground schooling in Red Dirt approaches with two-way/both-ways and bilingual schools taking root in

the Northern Territory (Devlin, Disbray, & Devlin, 2017). Coupled with this, priority was given to training Aboriginal teachers in remote schools (Raeburn et al., 2015) and the creation of language centres to resource local people teaching in schools (see Devlin et al., 2017). These priorities gradually lost favour as self-determination and then reconciliation (1990s) gave way to a policy logic of intervention and Closing the Gap as a framework for measuring outcomes and providing accountability within a national context. By 2014, the review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (Wilson, 2014) argued that bilingual or first language education was largely unfeasible and that attention should be given to improving attendance and academic performance through evidence-based programs. These priorities mirrored existing Closing the Gap measures with a focus on English language literacy and numeracy, Year 12 attainment and later, on attendance. Principals of course were expected to take a lead in implementing these measures and 'community engagement' was seen as a vehicle for achieving better outcomes. This brief background paints a picture of changing priorities which school leaders have managed across eras of policy changes. This is all in addition to the responsibility for effective management of human resources including a transient, mainly nonIndigenous workforce and incorporating local educators, managing school finances and good governance processes and managing facilities, including construction and maintenance of school buildings, vehicles and staff housing.

## Literature

### The Construction of School Leadership Roles

In education circles, there is a seemingly accepted narrative that school leaders make a difference. But how and why do they make a difference? While there is a connection between what school leaders do and student outcomes, it is at least to some extent, indirect. School leaders, according to Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) perform four main functions: they set directions, develop people, manage organisations and improve instruction (see also Sun & Leithwood, 2015). They argue that these functions make a substantial contribution to learning outcomes. Mulford and Silins (2011) agree, but add that underpinning these functions of management, leaders should build a trusting environment, articulate and review school goals and ensure that school structures support experimentation where learning arises from mistakes as well as success.

Another key function that is becoming increasingly important for Australian school leaders is 'parent and community engagement' (Department of Education and Training, 2015). While at some levels this function may be shared by teaching staff, the responsibility for engagement lies mostly with school leaders. Auerbach (2010) proposes a continuum of leadership for partnerships, where leaders

work in one of four domains between preventing partnerships to building authentic partnerships, which she proposes is a 'reciprocal empowerment model, with families and educators co-constructing roles and engaging in dialogue and mutual learning' (p. 735). Not all leaders work in this way, and often system bureaucracies work against achieving the kind of collaboration envisaged by Auerbach. Shaked and Schecter (2017) apply systems thinking to school leadership, arguing that rather than addressing discrete functions, school leaders should lead 'wholes': 'Leading wholes thus permits principals to understand that a whole system may present emerging properties that are not explicitly apparent in the properties of its components' (p. 63). Even with systems thinking, school leaders may be captive to the 'hegemonic and counter-hegemonic blocs that push particular agendas' (Apple, 2017, p. 250). Apple's critique of power and dialogue in education positions school leaders within 'differential relations of power' (p. 252). In Red Dirt schools, these relations clearly privilege actors who are culturally and ideologically more aligned to the hegemonic bloc.

### School Leadership in Remote Australian Schools

Osborne (2017b) argues that power-laden dialogue between institutional representatives (including school leaders) and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities tends to elicit what Liberman (1980) describes as 'gratuitous concurrence', where less-powerful participants in a conversation attempt to mirror the views and assertions being presented, often by responding with a 'yes'. While utilised globally among Indigenous peoples as a mode of respectful social interaction and avoidance of potential conflict, gratuitous concurrence is more likely in any context wherever unequal power occurs.

Under such conditions, community narratives can act as a cloudy mirror of logic, values and assumptions (Osborne, 2014) and an unreliable guide for informing principal-led actions towards authentic partnerships for improving education. Nonlocal school leaders must negotiate a complex space of philosophical, language and power difference, discerning between rhetoric and reality in education dialogue:

In Anangu [Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara] communities, community rhetoric tends to support (or mirror) the Piranpa [non-Aboriginal]-led conversation about the need for school and a Western education for Anangu children. This can be baffling for Piranpa educators when children are then seemingly afforded the option of arriving at school hours late, or even not at all. The reality of relatively poor levels of school engagement seems completely at odds with the rhetoric of overwhelming support for the need for schooling and Western education as being critically important for the children's futures. (Osborne, 2014, p. 9)

It may be relatively easy to accept that principals and Aboriginal people in remote communities will have dif-

ferent ways of thinking (epistemologies), different ways of being (ontologies), different values (axiologies) and different beliefs about our place in the world (cosmologies). It is this disparity or gap in understanding that leads Osborne (2017a) to propose a Pitjantjatjara language framework '*kulini*' for orienting 'ethical listening' and knowledge negotiation in Anangu education and research endeavours. Phillips and Luke (2017, p. 1265) explain that: 'Indigenous standpoints on education are different in perspective, experience, belief and aspiration than those of non-Indigenous school leaders and teachers'. It follows then that 'Indigenous communities have different criteria for what counts as "success" beyond and in addition to test scores and other conventional measures' (Phillips and Luke, p. 1260).

The complexity of schools located within Red Dirt contexts suggests a need for a critical dialogue with the hegemonic structures that ignore the 'absent presences' (Apple, 2017, p. 250) of others, who might be considered as 'irrational' (for example, parents who fail to send their children to school).

Principals find themselves caught between the competing demands of the school, the local community and an 'upward accountability' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) environment, where accountability to the systems they are located within holds the dominant voice. For Aboriginal school leaders, this feeling is perhaps stronger. Kamara (2017) in an examination of five women Aboriginal leaders in the Northern Territory, described the women as 'robed in chameleon images to survive the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds' (p. 137). She describes fear of ostracism from within the community and apprehension of being accepted in western professional circles.

Against this backdrop, successful 'community engagement' requires school leaders to leverage the community-based assets (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) of the students' families, language, identity, histories and aspirations in shaping an education that is culturally and contextually responsive and better positioned to 'make a difference' (Klump & McNeir, 2005 cited in Brayboy & Castagno, 2009).

### Applying Red Dirt Thinking to Leadership

We originally coined the phrase 'Red Dirt Thinking' in 2012 as a counter to the prevailing discourses of deficit, disadvantage and 'gaps' that privileged metropolitan frameworks of success, effectiveness and values. Our intention has been to inform *action* in the remote education context. We hoped to 'interrupt' (Ainscow, 2005) established ways of thinking about the dialogue of power and pedagogy, systemic 'failings' and 'educational disadvantage'. 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, while retaining a firm grasp on the pragmatic (Red Dirt) in the other. School

leaders can easily apply Red Dirt Thinking through reflexive processes which question dominant assumptions and narratives that position the metropolitan as ‘good’ and the remote as ‘bad’. In our own research practice, we apply the same principles (Guenther, McRae-Williams, Osborne, & Williams, 2018)

## Methodology

The methodology used in this research was underpinned by several foundational (paradigmatic) assumptions. Our philosophical position coming into this research draws on a blend of constructivist/interpretivist and participatory paradigms (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). We (the authors) acknowledge our position as nonAboriginal or Torres Strait Islander researchers in community contexts where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders are the primary users in the education system. This creates a tension for us as researchers, where our goals include the promotion of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices (Guenther, Osborne, Arnott, & McRae-Williams, 2015). We acknowledge the risks associated with engaging remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints, as indicated by our research questions below (Guenther et al., 2018). We also recognise that the process of analysis involves bias, because of our inherent nonAboriginal or Torres Strait Islander positions.

Much of the RES work is based on qualitative methodology, designed to find out ‘what people do, know, think, and feel by observing, interviewing, and analyzing documents’ (Patton, 2015, p. 170). Our intent in using qualitative methods is not to uncover ‘what works’ or to find objective indicators of success. Rather, consistent with a participatory and interpretive paradigm, we are interested in phenomenological discovery and describing ‘narratively what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them’ (Erickson, 2018, p. 36).

Qualitative data were collected during the period from mid-2012 through to the end of 2014. Sites for interviews and focus groups included Alice Springs, Adelaide, Yulara, Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Wadeye, Darwin, Perth, Broome and two online focus groups with participants coming in from across all Australian jurisdictions except Tasmania. The physical sites were chosen because of their proximity to Red Dirt education stakeholders, our ability to access potential respondents and consistent with the constraints of ethical approvals. Data collection included participants from several communities across remote parts of Australia. We interviewed teachers, assistant teachers, school leaders, community members, policymakers, bureaucrats, university lecturers and researchers, vocational education and training and higher education students, youth workers, child care workers, education union members and representatives from nongovernment organisations (NGOs). In most instances, we used focus group interviews to discuss topics of particular interest to our respondents. The

topics included early childhood education, curriculum, leadership, workforce development, health and education, teacher quality, pathways from school, community engagement, boarding schools, technology and preservice teacher training. Each focus group was built on a series of open-ended questions designed to respond to our research questions. The open-ended nature of the focus groups meant that respondents were free to explore areas of concern to them. This resulted in rich conversations such that the themes raised in one focus group interview overlapped with other focus groups.

Ethical clearances were obtained through each of the universities the researchers in the project were attached to (Flinders University, University of South Australia and Charles Darwin University).

## Research Questions

Four questions underpinned the RES research. (1) What is education for in remote Australia and what can/should it achieve?; (2) What defines ‘successful’ educational outcomes from the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?; (3) How does teaching need to change in order to achieve ‘success’ as defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?; and (4) What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?

Leadership cuts across all the issues raised by these areas of investigation. This paper focusses on a synthesis of responses to a single question:

What do Red Dirt leaders believe is important for remote education (in terms of purpose, achieving success, teaching for success and system responses)?

## Analysis and Sources

The analysis draws on a range of data sources as tabulated below in Table 1. The largest amount of qualitative data comes from 45 focus groups and interviews with 250 remote education stakeholders. Some data are also extracted from reports of additional research conducted either by or for the RES project team. We used NVivo qualitative analysis software to collate, code and analyse the data.

For the purpose of this paper, we constructed three groups of respondents and coded data accordingly: (1) nonlocal education leaders—Aboriginal and nonIndigenous respondents who had leadership roles, and who came from outside the Red Dirt context; (2) local education leaders—Aboriginal education leaders from within the Red Dirt context; and (3) Aboriginal community members from within the Red Dirt context, but without a leadership role. We defined ‘education leaders’ as those who had a leadership role in remote education: current and former principals and assistant principals, regional directors and coordinators, union leaders and bureaucrats who had a leadership role in education.

**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 <sup>†</sup>
Butchers papers and whiteboards	20	197	0	0
Total	87	3665	1126	

\*Includes coding references assigned outside of the research questions.

<sup>†</sup>Note that some survey reports used for this analysis did not detail the participant numbers.

A more detailed description of the data analysis and methods used is contained in a summary report from the CRC-REP website (Guenther, 2015).

## Findings

The presentation of findings here focusses mostly on the perceptions of local and nonlocal leaders (see, for example, Guenther et al., 2015; Guenther et al., 2016). Figure 1 (below) highlights the top ten themes that each group raised, grouped according to the research question they answer. The descriptors associated with themes are shown in Appendix 1, Table A1. We suggest that these themes are what each group considers most important. Note that the 22 broad themes listed represent one-quarter of all the themes raised by respondents and those shown in the figure below represent just the top 10 themes.

What stands out from the data shown below is that there is little intersection between the top priorities of nonlocal school leaders and Aboriginal community members. There is, however, one area of concern that is shared by all groups: the need for local language Aboriginal teachers. Nonlocal school leaders tended to see the role of local Aboriginal staff from a school or system perspective either as role models for other staff and students, or in the context of employment strategy targets.

### Local Language Aboriginal Teachers

Leaders tended to talk about local language staff in terms of 'two-way' learning, part of a team or even a 'professional learning community'. One nonlocal leader talked about the role of assistant teachers in leadership:

We've got 268 assistant teachers working in our schools in the Northern Territory ... they're the people who turn up every day . . . If we're looking at leadership in schools, it doesn't have to come simply from putting an Indigenous person at the top.

Some remote Aboriginal respondents also felt that mentoring was important:

We need local Indigenous teaching staff, training and mentoring for the next generation of teachers, as many who trained in the 1980s have or will soon retire.

However, the largest number of remote community responses discussed the role of local staff in maintaining culture and teaching language:

We should be inviting Anangu from the community to come and teach Anangu culture. The Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and Anangu teachers should be teaching them to read and write in the local language.

Another local Aboriginal leader put this very simply:  
(students need to) keep learning their language and culture.

Regardless of the similarities and differences in responses, the common belief that local language Aboriginal educators make a difference to remote education, was strong. It should be noted that several of the local leaders interviewed had a long history of involvement in education, spanning back to the early days of bilingual education. Some were a product of the period of self-determination where local Aboriginal teacher training was a priority.

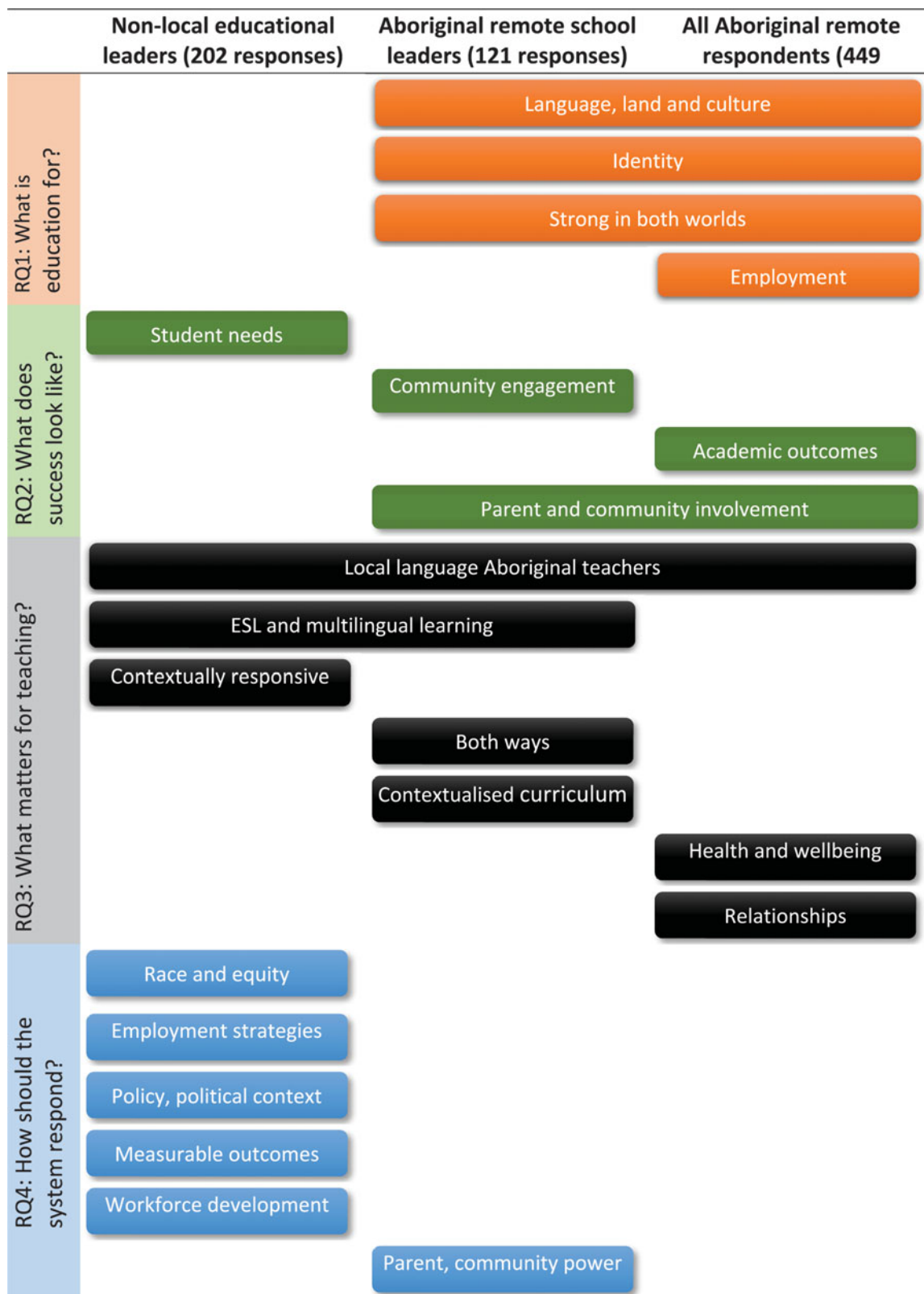
### Systemic Issues for Nonlocal Leaders

A second stand-out feature of the figure is the strong focus of nonlocal leaders on systemic issues: employment strategies, policy and political contexts, measurable outcomes, workforce development and issues of race and equity. The race and equity issue does not sound like a systemic issue, but it emerged in discussions about how remote children learn and comments relating to equity consider a whole of system perspective by way of comparison. For example, the top down, one size fits all approaches were a problem for some leaders:

Different communities and their kids will need to learn in different ways so that they have an equal chance of getting to that particular end point. So I've got some real arguments with the system and the way they're forcing us to think about education.

Another nonremote leader grappled with similar issues, concerned about the tension his desire to see community aspirations were reflected in ethical approaches to Red Dirt education:

It's a huge pressure on educators to do that and it's a real, it becomes a moral dilemma . . . Does what we're doing reflect



**FIGURE 1**  
 (Colour online) Main issues raised for each RQ by respondent type.

what communities want, what the kids want or is it what we want for them, having these high expectations and feeling like there needs to be equity and access for all?

Another senior bureaucrat positioned thoughts on systemic responsibilities in terms of human rights, before returning to the more familiar territory of outcomes. This respondent clearly knows that the system has human rights obligations, but effectively comes to the conclusion that he will do what is feasible and what he is tasked or told to do.

We can only do what we've got a statutory responsibility to do which is to provide kids with education. We've got an international responsibility and human rights agreements to make sure Indigenous people get the same opportunities as non-Indigenous people . . . What our responsibility as an education system is, to the people within all the communities—what we're equipped, skilled and qualified to do, and charged to do by our ministers and the people who fund these services, and how we can negotiate the outcomes that everybody is trying to get to. I'm not sure that we're clear about what that is.

There were many other instances where nonlocal leaders grappled with how to juggle the seemingly contradictory and elusive goals 'that everybody is trying to get to' and the responsibilities under human rights agreements. However, nonlocal leaders were also grappling with other system drivers such as the changing policy and political context, workforce development needs and employment strategies. In some cases, the issues were all rolled in together, as with this exchange during a focus group discussion on the issue of workforce development where rights and equity are woven into a broader discussion about staff housing:

The classic example is where [a community leader] was living in a lean-to as a principal . . . You've got graduates coming up from Melbourne or whatever with no prior experience in Indigenous communities who are getting a three-bedroom house to themselves.

We've got [a local school leader] out at [a community] who lives in a council house, has to pay rent, has to pay the electricity and gas and what not now. We've got a co-principal there with her, [name] who is white, she gets a free house and everything free whereas [local school leader] doesn't.

The issues of teacher housing, policy, workforce development and employment strategies are all important issues for educational leaders who are responsible for decision-making at a school, department or regional level. However, the data show that these issues are less important to both remote Aboriginal leaders and community members. For these people, what happens in the community, at the school and in the classroom are primary in their thinking. Remote Aboriginal leaders have concerns about processes of teaching and learning: learning both ways, engaging with a contextualised curriculum, and engaging with the community. Sometimes, these issues come together, for example, in this comment from a remote Aboriginal

leader, who describes bringing together elders (engaging the community) with a discussion about (contextualised) curriculum because 'they wanted language and culture to be taught in schools' (a both ways approach).

One way that we have tried to get our people and our knowledge into the schools is with that curriculum. Well me and [a non-Indigenous academic] 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 it's in that curriculum, that's just been sitting on the shelf, which is so rich.

### Concerns of Remote Aboriginal School Leaders

Remote Aboriginal leaders shared several key concerns with other remote community members, particularly, in terms of what education is for (language, land and culture, identity and being strong in both worlds) and how success is defined (in terms of parent and community involvement). For example, one remote Aboriginal educational leader described the connection between language and identity:

We believe that our children are happier learning first in their own language. They have more confidence in learning, in themselves and they learn more effectively.

One remote Aboriginal principal shared his thoughts about the importance of a holistic view of success that brings community members along:

If we talk about success, it needs to be holistic, it needs to involve the community. Too often, remote community schools or schools in remote areas set themselves up as islands and they set themselves up as the institution that is going to resolve the issue with Indigenous people when in reality that's not the case.

Another remote Aboriginal leader, echoing the feelings of her community, observed how confidence (identity) is connected 'through our spirits', and in turn through strong families (parent and community involvement).

Our children will grow strong in their learning at school when their families stand with them as that strong solid rock. They will be strong and confident through our spirits. We are using our spirits as a foundation for the children. If the child's parents are weak, then the extended family will come alongside him to support him.

Figure 1 also highlights issues that are priorities for community members but are not high on the list of important concerns for either nonlocal leaders or remote Aboriginal leaders. These priorities include employment pathways beyond school (in response to what education is for), academic outcomes (in response to what success looks like) as well as health and wellbeing and relationships (in response to teaching to success).

## Discussion

The contrasting views of nonlocal education leaders and their remote Aboriginal counterparts reflect their different ontological, epistemological, cosmological and axiological positions. But are these positions mutually exclusive? Do the competing priorities of nonlocal leaders and those of remote Aboriginal leaders mean that the voices of community members are ignored? And how can nonlocal leaders strengthen their understanding of and advocacy for the priorities of community members and remote Aboriginal leaders? We now turn our attention to discuss these issues.

### Mutually Exclusive Priorities?

While educational leaders may to some degree feel caught between local community, school and system priorities, our data show that nonlocal leaders tend to be more focussed on system priorities than on community priorities—the upward accountabilities suggested by Rizvi and Lingard (2010). In the remote school context, they can be seen as masters of the ‘island’ (described above by an Aboriginal school leader) with little consideration of what lies in the sea surrounding them. This reflects nonlocal leaders’ alignment with the hegemonic bloc, as described by Apple (2017) but is not the position of all educational leaders. Apple (2017, p. 249) cites Anderson’s ‘examination of the commitments involved in ‘advocacy leadership’, (2009)’ and ‘Helen Gunter’s articulate discussion of an Arendtian position on issues of educational leadership (2014)’ in reflecting on school leaders who challenge the conditions of power and upward accountability. This leads Apple (2017) towards questions of relevance to Red Dirt school leaders, positing:

... it would be useful to see what the traditions of leadership were in the racially segregated schools of the south in the United States or in First Nation schools in Canada, or in Maori schools in New Zealand, where everyday leadership had to often fight against an interventionist and racialising state. Did a more community-based and responsive form of leadership evolve? What contradictions and compromises had to be engaged in? (p. 249)

As nonlocal leaders make moves towards engaging local community priorities, they become increasingly aware of tensions between upward accountability models and local community demands. The contradictions and compromises Apple points to highlight tensions for nonlocal remote school leaders who are wedged between systemic norms and a risk of being viewed as too close to the community. But this tension of feeling ‘caught in the middle’ (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013, p. 395) is most problematic for Aboriginal school leaders who know and understand community priorities from a position of belonging and representation but who are also accountable to the departmental bureaucracies they serve and the professional demands of the peers they work with day-to-day. The tensions they feel are reflected in the concerns they

have for ‘both ways’ approaches, a contextualised curriculum and community engagement. In one sense, these leaders can see and attempt to ameliorate the competing demands of communities and bureaucracies. Kamara’s (2017) picture of principals as being robed in chameleon images is apt. We are not suggesting that nonlocal leaders are doing a bad job or that local leaders are doing a better job. Rather, the point is that both groups feel the pull of pressures from those they are more closely aligned with.

The evidence shown here may suggest that system priorities about what matters and what communities think matters are largely mutually exclusive with very little overlap. Local Aboriginal leaders may act as a bridge or a broker between the two, but we cannot say for sure how effective they are in this role. There is one exception that cuts across all three groups—nonlocal leaders, local Aboriginal leaders and community members—the importance of local language Aboriginal teachers. ‘Teachers’ in the context of many remote schools do not necessarily mean ‘registered four year university qualified’ teachers. Many of the respondents we interviewed (including some represented in the findings) reflected a desire to see local Aboriginal teachers working as part of a team, a theme that emerges strongly in Devlin et al.’s (2017) *History of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory*.

Pursuing employment and workforce development strategies (a priority for nonlocal leaders) with a focus on local workforce recruitment and training could well support community aspirations for education. However, according to My School data for the Northern Territory, 44 schools (about half of all very remote schools) did not employ any nonteaching staff, even though research tells us that local staff matter for improved educational outcomes and attendance (Guenther & Disbray, 2015).

### How Can Community Voices Make Themselves Heard?

The impetus of large bureaucratic systems can at times stifle community voice as strategies and programs (like the NT Department of Education’s Indigenous Education Strategy or ‘Direct Instruction’) are ‘rolled out’. The activity and ‘noise’ of policy initiatives (such as the Transition Support Unit or the Remote School Attendance Strategy) can drown out the voices of those who have alternative priorities in remote communities—we see Apple’s (2017) ‘differentials of power’, discussed earlier, clearly at play.

One of the ways to bring out local voices is through representative groups. The Wilson Review (Wilson, 2014, p. 66) notes that ‘There is no independent Indigenous body with a mandate and responsibility to speak on behalf of Indigenous people on educational matters’. The NT Indigenous Education Advisory Council, established in 1999 following the Collins Review (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999) was abandoned in 2015 leaving little room for the government system to engage at the Territory level. This is not to suggest that



the Department of Education has no access to community voice; rather, its current structures make it difficult for community members to be heard. Plans to develop school community engagement charters (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2016) in schools or to develop 'community-led' schools (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2017) may well be a response to the need for community involvement, but to date there is little tangible evidence about what these initiatives mean. Nevertheless, these strategic directions give weight to the important function of community engagement suggested earlier in the literature (Auerbach, 2010).

It is then left for communities and regions to self-organise in such a way as to be heard. The Yothu Yindi Foundation's North East Arnhem Land Education Stakeholder Consultations is one example where regional representation to government has been effective in achieving locally driven outcomes (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2016). Notably, in this case, the new boarding facility at Nhulunbuy demonstrates what can be achieved. Other regional bodies such as the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust point to proactively engaged communities pursuing equitable and just educational options (Disbray & Guenther, 2017). There are also examples of schools taking an independent path (such as Nyangatjatjara College, Tiwi College, Marpuru School and the Nawarddeken Academy, all in the NT).

### What Can Nonlocal Educational Leaders do to Hear the Voices of Community Members?

The RES project found and worked with many nonlocal leaders who were not only interested in hearing community voices, but who actively sought to listen (Osborne, 2017a). The strategies they used included employing local people. For example, one leader said he would employ anyone who wanted a job at the school. This might seem extreme, but for him this strategy worked. Another strategy was to have an active school council. Many remote school leaders found this challenging—ensuring that all family groups or clans are represented can be difficult. We noted the importance of training or professional learning as a vehicle for engagement. Some principals went out of their way to ensure that local staff had opportunities for both formal training and nonformal learning, such as attending conferences and participating in reference groups. Others ensured that cultural activities with local involvement were high priorities. There is no magic formula for this but applying Red Dirt Thinking (Osborne & Guenther, 2013) to the problem of community engagement (which is what these educational leaders did) allows for a contextualised and culturally responsive approach—and yet also treats remote education as a systemic whole (Shaked & Schecter, 2017).

At a system level, Red Dirt Thinking would ensure that accountability measures were not just about national

priorities (such as Closing the Gap) but would demand measurement of achievement against community engagement outcomes. We propose several accountability measures that could work in this regard (see, Guenther et al., 2016, ch. 13) including employment of local staff, local involvement in school councils and community involvement in schools. These measures require a degree of critical dialogue that include the otherwise 'absent presences' (Apple, 2017, p. 250) and treat the 'other' as rational rather than irrational. At the same time, nonlocal leaders must continue to draw on and incorporate community-based assets (Moll et al., 1992) within schooling approaches.

There are other measures that could better reflect local ways of knowing, being, valuing and believing that we pointed to in the literature. These might include aspects of resourcing for local language teaching, learning on country activities, inclusion of local histories and aspects of legal and ecological studies in the curriculum. To the best of our knowledge, these measures are not currently part of accountability frameworks for remote schools.

### Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper points to some key differences in what nonlocal, Aboriginal remote leaders and remote Aboriginal community respondents think is most important for a good education in remote community schools. For nonlocal leaders, most of their concerns were focussed on systemic responses to educational issues. Remote Aboriginal leaders and community members were strongly focussed on the more philosophical questions about what education is for (particularly in relation to language, land, culture and identity), and then on how success is defined and how teachers should teach to those views of success.

There was one point that all respondent groups agreed on: the need for local language Aboriginal teachers. Each group recognised the value of recruiting and training local staff. They were seen as important vehicles for successful education delivery. Further, they were seen to be intrinsically important to school–community engagement strategies. While in other areas, our data may suggest that the concerns of nonlocal leaders and community members are mutually exclusive, we suggest that building a local workforce can facilitate desirable outcomes for all stakeholders in remote schools. On the one hand, they can (and do) deliver better outcomes for attendance and academic achievement, and on the other they are a source for inspiration and improved capacity within communities.

While we recognise that for many local Aboriginal school leaders, current arrangements for education in remote communities are less than ideal, we do recognise the progress that many nonlocal and local Aboriginal leaders make as they apply their own version of Red Dirt Thinking to achieve better outcomes for students.

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## Appendix: Node descriptors

**TABLE A1**

Key Themes and Node Descriptors

Education: what is it for	1) What is education for in remote Australia?
Language, land and culture	Maintaining language and culture, connection to land, cultural role within community, continuity, transmission of knowledge
Identity	Personal agency, belonging, getting to know other people, confidence, growing up strong, pride
Employment and economic participation	Paid work, getting a job, work experience
Strong in both worlds	Two languages, literacies, ways to act in both cultures, competence, secret white man’s way, broker between cultures
Success	2) What defines ‘successful’ educational outcomes from the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
Parent involvement and role models in child’s education	Support, commitment and aspiration, role models, older family members leading the way for younger ones, community mentors
Academic outcomes	Measured against what is taught, literacy and numeracy, classroom-based achievement, ‘performance’, progress, reading and writing
Community engagement	community participation in schooling, authentic engagement, bringing expertise from the community into school, community consultation
Meeting student needs	Knowing students, tracking, individual assessment, responding to individual needs, case management
Teaching to achieve success	3) How does teaching need to change in order to achieve ‘success’ as defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
ESL and multilingual learning	Bilingual programs, language skills, need for mentoring, teacher awareness of language, use of first language
Relationships	Students, parents, other staff, Aboriginal Education Workers, becoming part of the community
Contextually responsive	Being informed, differentiated approaches to teaching, understanding other agencies and supports that are available, collaborative approaches adaptive, flexible
Local language Aboriginal teachers	Includes Assistant Teachers, office staff, positions of importance for local staff, valued, supported, opportunities for development, cultural broker role
Health and wellbeing at school	Child’s wellbeing at school is a priority, teasing, safety, school as a safe place, hearing, mental health, resilience
Contextualised curriculum	Reporting on progress and success, applying curriculum to the context, ‘Red Dirt curriculum’, learning on country
Both ways and two way	Generative spaces, knowledge exchanges, privileging local knowledge
System response	4) What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?
Workforce development	Undergraduate teacher programs, recruitment, orientation, professional learning, ongoing support, induction processes, mentoring, dealing with churn ‘renewing knowledge’,
Political, policy context	Impacts of politics and policies important consideration, actions driven by strategies of the day
Reconciliation, race, equity and Aboriginality	Treaty, class and Aboriginality, equity, opportunity, language as an asset not a barrier, human rights
Measurable outcomes and NAPLAN	Accountability, testing, NAPLAN, alternative ways of measuring success
Employment strategies and conditions	Fly-in/Fly-out, Aboriginal strategies/policies, organisational level senior decision-making and leadership, conditions of employment

### **About the Authors**

**John Guenther** is currently the Research Leader of Education and Training in Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Darwin. His work focuses on learning contexts, theory and practice and policies as they connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Between 2011 and 2016, he led the Remote Education Systems Project with the CRC for Remote Economic Participation. More detail about John's work is available at the <https://old.crc-rep.com/remote-education-systems> website.

**Sam Osborne** is an Associate Director, Regional Engagement (APY Lands) at the University of South Australia. He has vast experience in Aboriginal Education including Aboriginal languages and school leadership. He was a teacher, Deputy and Principal at Ernabella Anangu School in South Australia (2002–2008) and Centralian Australian Consultant for the Principals Australia Institute program Dare to Lead (2009–2011). Since that time he has worked in teaching, research, various advisory and board director positions as well as interpreting roles.