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CLIMBING *the* EDUCATIONAL MOUNTAIN: a METAPHOR *for* REAL CULTURE CHANGE *for* INDIGENOUS STUDENTS *in* REMOTE SCHOOLS

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■ Abstract

The history of remote school education in the Northern Territory can best be summarised as years of lost opportunities, pedagogies of discrimination, and diminished lives for those parents and children who trusted and responded to the government's invitation to come to school. From late 2001 to 2005 historic educational change occurred in the remote Community Education Centre of Kalkaringi and Daguragu in the Northern Territory, the site for the delivery of the Northern Territory's first Year 12 Indigenous graduates studying in their own community school. At the heart of the historic achievement was a radical change in thinking about education for Indigenous students. This paper discusses some of the policy parameters and educational circumstances that prevented significant change in the delivery model of education for the Community Education Centres in addition to a conceptualisation of how that school circumvented the policy parameters and instituted real change from the ground up. The paper examines, through a critical lens, the nature of the culture change that was crafted and built upon within Kalkaringi School and its communities, despite an initial and significant sense of powerlessness felt by families and to some extent the teachers and principal within the school. Through the development and embrace of a metaphor of possibility and hope – the challenge of climbing the educational mountain formed the foundation for a dedicated and committed enactment of an equitable educational entitlement for remote Indigenous students.

■ Introduction

During the period from late 2001 to 2005, historic events unfolded in a remote school for Indigenous students located around 480km southwest of Katherine in the Northern Territory. The creation, development and implementation of an innovative, controversial and challenging educational programme culminated in the first Indigenous students successfully completing their Year 12 studies from their home community. Each of the students subsequently gained successful entry into an Australian university based on their academic scores, rather than relying on their Aboriginality. This heralded a new chapter in the history of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory. Kalkaringi School and its surrounding communities of Kalkaringi and Daguragu became the sites, in which hopeful images of a fairer and more equitable education were nourished despite impoverished beginnings, and a pedagogy of hope established the foundation on which "a social and educational vision of justice and equality" (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 6) was born and enacted.

In early 2002, the newly-appointed principal asked that families from the communities of Kalkaringi and Daguragu consider the following question: "What do you want the schooling process to do for your children?" In other words, "what kind of people do you want your children to become when they have completed their high school education?" Rather than the more common question of "what do you want your children to do at school?", this question acknowledged the crucial importance of defining the purpose of education as a first step in shaping a model of education that would engage the teachers, students and their families in the kind of change that has the capacity to transform the future for the next generation of Indigenous adults. When "that which is not yet" (Bloch, 1970, p. 87) is courageously considered and defined, then everything that affects the school community can be monitored through its capacity to contribute to the achievement of that purpose. In earlier research carried out in the Indigenous community of Indulkana in the far north of South Australia, I defined this process as "backmapping" (Hewitson, 1998). At Kalkaringi

School, the emphasis on defining purpose galvanised the two communities to reach towards the educational mountain, a metaphor that was introduced within the ongoing discussions between community and school.

In 2002, the principal continued the ongoing dialogue with the students, their families, and the school and community councils offering the following proposition: What if as parents we learn more about our children as they grow older? What if we learn more about education as our children become more educated? What if we learn more about what we don't know because of what our children do know? What if we learn more about the world and our place in it because we share our ideas and listen to others' ideas in a coming together of the minds and hearts? Surely then, we need to recognise parents and families as belonging to a "circle of learners" (Horton & Freire, in Bell et al., 1990, pp. 151-152) with school leadership and teachers:

They're growing because they've learned from their peers. They've learned not what they knew but knew they didn't know. They learned something from the questions you raised. You've got them to thinking, so right there before your eyes their experience is changing. You're not talking about the experience they brought with them (Horton & Freire, in Bell et al., 1990, pp. 151-152).

On Wednesday, 18 June 2003, Federal member for Lingiari, Mr Warren Snowden contributed the following to the ongoing discussion in the House of Representatives regarding Indigenous education in the Northern Territory:

In the Northern Territory there are 45,000 children of school age. Of these, 38 per cent – or roughly 17,000 – are Indigenous. Importantly ... around 5,000 of those 17,000 have no access to either a decent primary or secondary school. In fact, there has never been a graduate – not one – at year 12 level of any bush school in the Northern Territory. This year, however, there are four young Indigenous students and one non-Indigenous student at Kalkaringi in year 12 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 16944).

The eventual success of the students mentioned in Hansard in completing their Northern Territory Certificate of Education (NTCE) set in motion demands from other Indigenous communities throughout the Northern Territory, each requesting that their community be able to access a similar educational programme, and for their children to be able to achieve similar goals. The students, teachers, school community, and families from Kalkaringi and Daguragu celebrated their historic achievement, and the Northern

Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET) and the government of the day were delighted that history was beginning to change for the better. Kalkaringi School was termed, by the then Minister of Employment, Education and Training in the Northern Territory Government, "a school of high significance – not just locally, but also on a national level" (Stirling, 2005).

Despite these celebrations, no significant attempt was undertaken by the Northern Territory Government or its education department throughout the four year period to understand or make sense of what transpired in that remote community beyond collecting some basic quantitative data. Instead, increasing attention was focused on promoting the historic achievements but the theoretical framework that underpinned all aspects of schooling at Kalkaringi, without which the achievements would not have been possible, seemed invisible and of little interest to outsiders. Without examining how and why educational history was being changed at Kalkaringi, the capacity of the government and its education department to systematise the emerging and productive pedagogies from Kalkaringi, would remain unexplored.

This paper begins to address this omission, and discusses some of the policy parameters and educational circumstances that prevented significant change in the delivery model of education for the Community Education Centres, in addition to a conceptualisation of how Kalkaringi School circumvented the policy parameters and instituted real change from the ground up. The paper reveals the importance of critical theory and pedagogy in forming the underpinnings of the culture change that was crafted and built upon within Kalkaringi School and its communities. Through the development and embrace of a metaphor of possibility and hope – the challenge of climbing the educational mountain formed the foundation for a dedicated and committed enactment of an equitable educational entitlement for Indigenous students in this remote school.

■ Critical theory and pedagogy form the basis for change

"We make the road by walking", said Paulo Freire (Bell et al., 1990, p. 6). These words, derived from a proverb by Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1982, p. 143) inspired the transformative work at Kalkaringi School to proceed by encouraging the people within the school to move past condemnation of the past and instead use it as a focus for reflecting on how things had come to be this way, and what could be done to ensure a better future for its young people. Kalkaringi School relied on a conceptualisation of change that was both multifaceted and complex, drawing on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (Bell et al., 1990; Freire, 1972; Freire & Dillon, 1985), the Frankfurt School of critical theory with

the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm; Henry Giroux's expanding work on critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1983, 1988) and Roger Simon's work on schooling as a project of possibility (Simon, 1987, 1992) to provide an optimistic and emerging theoretical framework in addition to a critical language which had the potential to "unravel and comprehend the relationship among schooling, the wider social relations which inform it, and the historically constructed needs and competencies that students bring to school" (Giroux, 1988, p. xi). This was crucial in changing the business of Indigenous education in a remote school because only through such a framework and language was there the opportunity to "to recognise how the dominant school culture is implicated in hegemonic practices that often silence subordinate groups of students as well as deskill and disempower those who teach them" (Giroux, 1988, p. xi).

In its beginnings, transforming the remote school in Kalkaringi was significantly tied to the fundamental and philosophical principle of critical theory that "men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege" (McLaren, 2003, p. 69). Paramount to the transformation concept was an acknowledgment of the "interactive context" (McLaren, 2003, p. 69) and the dialectical nature of the students' and teachers' lives at Kalkaringi, thereby rejecting the historically unchallenged view that the students were "simply isolated events of individuals of deficiencies in the social structure" (McLaren, 2003, p. 69). By focusing the critical lens more specifically on education, the work of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux and the application of the concept of "radical pedagogy" (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983) to the Indigenous context, the transformation plan began to take shape with "macro objectives" (McLaren, 2003, p. 71) adopted as essential building blocks. These building blocks rejected pedagogy as "a discrete set of strategies and skills that are used to teach prescribed subject matter" (Doyle and Singh, 2006, p. 51), replacing it with a form of critical practice in which students "acquire a broad frame of reference or worldview" (McLaren, 2003, p. 71), helping them to "acquire a political perspective" (McLaren, 2003, p. 71). As Freire said:

The more people participate in the process of their own education, the more the people participate in the process of defining what kind of production to produce, and for what and why, the more the people participate in the development of their selves (Bell et al., 1990, p. 145).

The main "macro objective" was "to empower students to intervene in their own self-formation and to transform the oppressive features of the wider society that make such an intervention necessary" (Giroux,

1988, p. xi). Therefore, the "certain permanent tension" (Freire, 1985, p. 177) that existed in the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the student must be identified as "a tension that is reconcilable" (Freire, 1985, p. 177) and crucial for developing and embracing a "pedagogy of possibility" (Simon, 1992). A pedagogy of possibility might be defined as the practice of teaching which "involves learning on the part of those we are teaching, as well as learning, or relearning, on the part of those who teach" (Freire, 1985, p. 177).

■ Rejecting first order change

The theoretical approach that I have briefly described represents the antithesis of the standard approach to delivering education in the remote school context. As a way of understanding the conceptualisation of change that I previously referred to, I offer Evans' (1996) concepts of "first order change" and "second order change" as a means of assisting the reader in confronting and understanding the threatening and exigent aspects of real culture change. Vaill (1989) defines "real culture change" as "systemic change at a deep psychological level involving attitudes, actions, and artefacts that have developed over substantial periods of time" (pp. 149-50). Real culture change occurs when families join the teachers, the leaders and the students forming an ongoing sharing experience in which everyone contributes to the development of beliefs about the future. As hooks (2003) said:

In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of – not only within – our own group ... We have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with another person, we have the possibility of making a change within ourselves, that we can become deeper (pp. xv-xvi).

"First order change" however, involves "try[ing] to improve the efficiency or effectiveness" (Evans, 1996, p. 5) of what is already established and practiced. The problem with this kind of change is that it simply reorganises what an organisation does. It might restructure who processes requests; who deals with problem a or problem b; however the fundamental values, beliefs and operating rationale that guide why something is done, the nature of what is done and how it is done remain safely untouched, unchallenged, and unchanged. First order change is more easily initiated and controlled by governments and their departments.

"Second order change", on the other hand, necessitates "people to not just do old things slightly differently but also to change their beliefs and perceptions" (Evans, 1996, p. 5). This kind of change has the potential to threaten people's most basic

values and beliefs and so it is often accompanied by serious and complicated consequences, but without them, real culture change remains merely rhetoric. This is not to suggest that this kind of change is not worth pursuing, but it does mean that any expectation for significant change in values and beliefs necessitates considerable investment in time, ongoing and genuine critical assessment strategies, and a willingness and commitment by everyone involved to think and act "against the grain" (Simon, 1992). Second order change became the business of Kalkaringi School.

■ Pedagogies of hopelessness and first order change

The history of remote school education in the Northern Territory can best be summarised as years of lost opportunities and pedagogies of hopelessness, leading to diminished lives for those parents and children who trusted and responded to the government's invitation to come to school. Research that has reviewed Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999, p. 19) has suggested that "high teacher turnover and poor attendance" remain "the most significant cause[s] of poor learning." While these two factors certainly have a detrimental effect on any child's capacity to maximise the opportunities that come from their schooling, they do not explain the evolution of school days in a remote school that offers half the learning time to its students, or a curriculum that offers two or three of the available seven or eight knowledge areas as outlined and mandated in curriculum frameworks. These organisational constructs are noticeable signs of long-term "differential provision", a term from John Coons et al., (1970) that Jonathon Kozol cites in *Savage inequalities* (1991) to explain why some students "in the economic race are hobbled at the gate", while others, outside the remote location enjoy a more "preferential education" (p. 207) with a full day's education made up of a balanced and broad curriculum. Indigenous students attending schools in remote locations have not only been recipients of the "banking system" (Freire, 1972) of education, but more harmful, has been the legitimisation of "differential provision" thereby locking students out of future possibilities that require skills and knowledge in areas such as high levels mathematics and specialist science strands regardless of their individual abilities and talents:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom consider to know nothing ... [This] negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry ... The students ... never discover that they educate the teacher (pp. 46-47).

The provision of a system of teaching and learning that fails to offer breadth and balance with challenging increments equal to that of any other school reflects a view about the students themselves which significantly contributes to the status quo of hopelessness. Students denied access to and experience in the sciences, many of the humanities, areas of business and law as well as information technology are indeed hobbled at the gate. The resounding voices of those who have supported these decisions often declare cultural inappropriateness in their defence (Meaney, 2002). Kalkaringi School's response to the question of cultural appropriateness was dealt with as a methodological question rather than an imposition on educational entitlement. Kozol (1991) described the consequences of learning in an environment of hopelessness:

Everything is acceptance ... People get used to what they have. They figure it's the way it's supposed to be and they don't think it's going to change ... If you don't know what you're missing, you're not going to get angry. How can you desire what you cannot dream of? (p. 228)

The pedagogy of hopelessness locks students and their families into an educational environment that defines simple, basic, friendly and fun as the key elements to remote school education, and as Kozol suggested, if you do not know any different, then you are not going to get angry, and demand something else.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the events that took place at Kalkaringi from late 2001 to 2005, it is crucial that there be some attempt to describe the educational circumstances that preceded late 2001 both within the school, typical of many other operating at the time, as well as some discussion of the policy parameters that prevented significant change in the delivery model of education for the larger remote schools referred to as Community Education Centres.

■ Reviewing remote school education

In 1999, the late Honourable Bob Collins and his team completed a "comprehensive independent review of the delivery of education to Indigenous students in the Northern Territory" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999, p. ix). The review was commissioned to report on the following three terms of reference: (a) the views and educational aspirations of Indigenous parents and community members in relation to their children's schooling, with particular reference to English literacy and numeracy; (b) the key issues affecting educational outcomes for Indigenous children; and (c) supportable actions for educational outcome improvements.

The final report stated clearly that "improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students across the Northern Territory" was "the greatest challenge

facing the Northern Territory Department of Education (NTDE)" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999, p. 17). The report openly declared that "Indigenous education must become a critical part of the core business of the NTDE" and would require "a real culture change" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999, p. 17) to achieve this. The report named numerous direct causes of poor educational outcomes for Indigenous students which included "poor attendance, poor attention; teacher turnover, language learning difficulties, attrition and fragmented approaches" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999, p. 29). The "real culture change" that the review alluded to was not addressed in any section or chapter of the report. The report was "swept up in the urgency of a problem and the promise of a solution" (Evans, 1996, p. 38). The easier, faster and less threatening solution to what was clearly a crisis in remote school education, was first order change that demanded fewer alterations from people, and more alterations from structures and processes. Indeed, much of what was discussed in the review might be interpreted as first order change. Management system changes, alterations to funding and costs structures, school facilities and infrastructure, staffing, access and provision, language and literacy acquisition as well as attendance and participation were discussed in the various chapters as though they existed in isolation from each other, and without discussion of their interaction with the most important elements in any change process – the people. The "interactive context" (McLaren, 2003, p. 69) and the dialectical nature of the problems in remote schooling remained as "simply isolated events ... of deficiencies in the social structure" (McLaren, 2003, p. 69).

Policy and educational initiatives as impediments to success

In late 2001, Community Education Centres, the type of school most often found in the larger remote communities of the Northern Territory, were not acknowledged as schools with secondary school students, even though many attended. In 1995, this type of school was considered "a recent innovation" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p. 179) designed to "provide a comprehensive range of educational services to Indigenous students in remote areas" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p. 179). There were eight Community Education Centres in 1989 and by 1994 the number had grown to 18. The students were openly referred to as secondary-aged (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p. 179) or post-primary students. The invention of these labels was already a significant sign of deeply entrenched discrimination under the guise of providing an appropriate education. This distinction positioned these students as not having earned the status of a high

school student, and was important in the accepted construction and delivery of low-level, low-outcome, educational programmes for those students, despite its intention to "provide wider access to education ... and support tertiary courses in remote communities" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p. 179). This discriminatory approach to the education of Indigenous students in remote schools was legitimised through this process. Consequently, the failure to recognise the 12–18 year old students as high school students relegated them to school pedagogies based on simplified expectations, mismatched beliefs about their abilities and needs, filling students and their families with minimal dreams and opportunities to maximise their potential. Essentially, these students were treated as primary school students and it was rationalised by the belief that limited and indeed deficit student literacy and numeracy skills were best addressed through the adoption of primary school methodologies. There was minimal if any consideration of students as adolescents and emerging adults. Judgements about their academic abilities defined their treatment at school. This kind of pedagogy was not neutral:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Shaull, 1990, pp. 13-14).

The status quo adopted the former function of education while Kalkaringi School strived to transform pedagogical practices to become the latter. Despite being termed an innovation, Community Education Centres failed to aim for and hence deliver equitable and commensurate education programmes with students of the same age in more mainstream circumstances. The publication and distribution of foundation and general studies courses (Northern Territory Board of Studies, 1995) proved to be a major vehicle by which established views of deficit and low expectations for Indigenous students by both government and the education department were supported and reinforced. These courses were created under the umbrella of Aboriginal Education Program Initiative 17, Curriculum and Coordination in Community Education Centres, and was a largely Commonwealth-funded project. Although the initiative aimed "to improve access for Aboriginal students to a comprehensive range of educational programs" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p. 1) the generic foreword within the course booklets concluded with the following statement: "I commend Foundation Studies and General Studies to you as

excellent bridging courses into secondary studies for Aboriginal students (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p. 1).

Within the Access and Equity section of the Introduction to the course booklets, there was a judgement that these courses were necessary because "secondary-aged Aboriginal students ... do not yet have the levels of English language and literacy and Western numeracy required to access secondary academic programs" (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p. 2). In fact, the existence of the two-year courses implied and accepted the inevitability that many secondary-aged Indigenous students would need to complete an extra two-year programme prior to commencing secondary education. This was not the case for non-Indigenous students, regardless of their academic skills. Although this paper does not attempt to assess the quality of the preschool and primary educational programmes operating at the time, it is reasonable to suggest that students were rarely if ever provided with a primary schooling experience that enabled them to prove themselves as potentially capable secondary students.

It is recognised that students from a language background other than English may need a longer period to achieve the same linguistic competence as their English-as-a-first-language peers. Foundation studies and general studies have been written to meet this need and to act as a bridge into full secondary studies (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p. 3).

The discriminatory treatment of Indigenous students sentenced the students to spending two more years, at least, in primary-oriented classes, and given the size of many of the Community Education Centres and the attendance level within the post-primary classes, the students inevitably participated in a version of these courses as the only possible educational programme due to classes staffed as primary classes with one primary-trained teacher assigned to a class.

■ The culture of minimal entitlement and expectations

In late 2001, while visiting Kalkaringi School, I entered a classroom of what I thought were junior secondary students. They were secondary-aged students who were divided into separate boys and girls classes. I was visiting the girls' class. These students were Year 8 or 9 students and should have been aged between 12 and 15. I met a 19-year-old girl who was sitting quietly in her chair carrying out the work that she was supposed to be doing, and I asked her why she was in this class. She answered, "Because it's the only class we've got" (personal communication, 4 October, 2001). I looked more closely at the work that she was doing and I noticed that it looked a lot like work that my own children completed in Grade 4 of primary school. I then glanced at the textbooks

that she was using and I noticed that they were designed for secondary students. The standard of work within the books and the label on the front cover seemed mismatched. I asked the teacher about the student. "Did she come to school very often?" "Yes, all the time", answered the teacher. "Why was she doing this work?" I was told that because these children attended a Community Education Centre, they were only allowed access to this level and kind of secondary education. Rosaria, according to the Principal was able to access only half a day of education each day. These students were therefore denied 20 weeks of a full-time schooling entitlement each year. For Rosaria, this meant that in the past six years of her schooling, even if she attended every day, she would be 120 weeks behind in her schooling than a mainstream counterpart. Surely, it should not surprise the reader that Indigenous students from remote schools have found it difficult to meet the level of educational outcomes required within the designated Northern Territory Curriculum Framework (NTCF) with these kinds of organisational features in place.

In discussing this issue with teachers who had taught students at the school for more than five years, I was told that young adults like Rosaria were faced with only a few options for their future. Firstly, she could remain at her local school and accept the monotonous, primary school treatment that equated English as second language status with intellectual disability, just as Rosaria had done, with little progression in her learning and minimal to non-existent opportunity to develop graduate capabilities. Students could decide to leave the community and board in an urban high school facility, but many ex-students and their families believed that these places held the same low-outcome views about Indigenous intellectual possibility, but with more side interests to maintain a hold on student retention. The consequence of this option was usually homesickness – a very powerful motivator for students to return home. If a student was sent away in Year 6 or Year 7, based on the return rate of boarding students from the Kalkaringi/Daguragu communities over the past 10 years, the chance that they would still be in the boarding school to complete Year 11 and 12 was minimal to impossible. There had been no community student who had completed their final certificate of education in a boarding school if they had left in their final year of primary schooling. One female student from Daguragu had been at boarding school and spent four years undertaking Year 11, only completing three of the compulsory 22 units towards her certificate of education during that time. She was 17 years old when she left for boarding school, and at 21 still had not completed what other students would have completed in two years in a mainstream high school. This was the same student who completed both Year 11 and Year 12 in two years at Kalkaringi School in the years

following her return from boarding school, and gaining admission to university.

The final option was to leave school and face a future shaped by those around them – early pregnancy for the girls and illegal activity for the boys often stemming from the boredom of having no specific activities to undertake each day (employment, education or training). This option was perhaps the most damaging. Each of the other two required a level of determination and commitment from both the student and their family. There were numerous young pregnancies at Kalkaringi and Daguragu, and many young men moved through the revolving door within the prison system. It was not uncommon to see young men spending a couple of months in prison on an assault charge, then released back into the same community surrounded by the same problems and the same people only to become involved in further illegal activity, and once again, charged and returned to prison. In 2005, in the middle school classes at Kalkaringi School, of the 50 or so students from Years 7-12, nearly every student had a relative in prison for minor offences like failing to pay fines to far more serious crimes like murder. According to many of the students, particularly the boys, but not exclusively, prison time, or at best, court appearances, had some level of inevitability attached to their future.

Although within the research, there appears to be some debate over whether the lack of employment for Indigenous young people encourages illegal activity leading to arrests and prison time, or time in prison makes it difficult to gain meaningful employment on release, there seems to be a direct connection between “the importance of addressing indigenous education in order to improve employment and therefore arrest rates” (Hunter, 1997, pp. 183-84). Hunter’s research concluded that, “Education is the largest single factor associated with the current poor outcomes for indigenous employment. Indeed, the influence of education dwarfs the influence of most demography, geography and social variable” (1997, p. 189). Hunter suggested that educational experience and qualifications are often used as a “screening device” (Hunter, 1997, p. 189) for the selection process in gaining employment, and for every young Indigenous person who leaves school before completing their education, or remains at school, as Rosaria did to undertake an education of “busywork” (Folds, 1987, p. 49), the greater the inequity in the possibility for successful employment.

The pedagogy of hopelessness was fully operational at Kalkaringi in 2001. On this day, I saw a classroom filled with young adolescents who were not asked to work hard and indeed covered in a whole afternoon what most secondary students would cover in half an hour. The employment of early childhood/primary methodology in teaching these students formed a major part of the paralysing effect on tapping into their

energy, excitement and commitment towards learning. School for these students was comprised of simple mathematics, simple English, sport and “busywork” (Folds, 1987, p.49) with activities such as “clubs” in which students played with various equipment for an afternoon session. How could the students complain? How could the families protest? Of the parents who had moved through the available educational arrangement, there was an acceptance that this was as good as it gets, and an increasing perception of the schooling experience as a never-ending provision of activities rather than an educational process of enquiry and engagement. The structure of the school’s timetable only enhanced their perception, thereby failing to significantly improve attendance. With a couple of excursions throughout a school year, a sports carnival every now and then, and half days of simple learning, the schooling experience for Indigenous students, like many others in similar types of schools, was defined, maintained and unchallenged by both families and the teachers who found themselves employed within these schools. Even the leaders seemed guided by the objective of making the students happy as a means of addressing the constant challenge of low attendance.

Over the next four years, I spent a great deal of time with Rosaria listening to her, and observing her in group and individual interviews as well in her classes. As part of her Year 12 studies, she co-wrote a play called “The visions of our future”, about the experiences that led her to enrol and participate in the senior secondary programme in 2002 and 2003. According to the play, Rosaria’s dreams had not been about the world outside of Kalkaringi because she did not know anything about that world. Her teachers had told her and her classmates, that she would not be interested; after all, her world, according to those who stood at the front of the classroom, was destined to include a job at the local store ... maybe. Or perhaps, she’d get pregnant and look after a few kids living on welfare. What was Rosaria’s potential? Who cared? Rosaria’s hopeless situation was a result of dozens, perhaps even hundreds of past teachers, principals, managers and line managers, ministers of education, chief executive officers doing nothing to improve her circumstance and thousands of other students in her predicament. Her teenage years had nearly run out, and there seemed to be no sign of change. Evans provides some explanation when he says that:

Our capacity to cope and adapt depends crucially on our impulse to seek meaning, to fit new experiences into a familiar pattern, our resistance to change is not only inevitable but also constructive, fundamental to learning, essential to adaptation. Our tendencies to ignore events we don’t understand, suppress unexpected behaviour, and limit innovations are ways we “defend our ability to make sense of life”. It is

natural, even necessary that we should avoid or reshape events we cannot assimilate, for our adaptability depends on as much on protecting our assumptions as it does on revising them (Evans, 1996, p. 27).

This analysis provides some explanation as to why students failed to engage in what was offered at school and why teachers and leaders continued to deliver a curriculum based on addressing their comfort and discriminatory beliefs about Indigenous students.

Rosaria was just one of many students who did not substantiate the information provided in the Learning Lessons Review (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999). She attended school fairly regularly, was attentive, had limited oral English abilities and primary school level written abilities and she never complained about the education that she was offered. She came from a family that generally supported school. Regardless of her capacity to improve, she did not. Just as the educational bureaucracy confidently painted every Indigenous student with the same brush, Rosaria remained at school with her potential untapped. She was growing old, treated as a child. Her circumstance required a change in the culture of every aspect that affected and denied her a capacity to improve herself. This kind of change involved changing the purpose of schooling.

There was no evidence that any principles of equal opportunity were in the minds of those in government or bureaucracy in regard to the development of policies and practices related to the delivery of education for students located in Community Education Centres. The notion of education as an entitlement seemed foreign to those who shaped the schooling experience for those students. The commitment to ensuring that all Australian children have an entitlement to accessing an education system that treats them with respect and dignity, and which is not shaped from any deficit position, did not exist for the remote Indigenous student.

A web of mechanisms, many with a long history related back to the early policies of the Aborigines Protection Boards, was in play, which at best still positioned Indigenous children to provide "a pool of cheap, unskilled labour" (Behrendt, 2003, p. 72) for the future. Legitimised mechanisms such as the creation and segregation of remote post-primary students from the larger Territorian, mainstream, secondary cohort; the minimisation of school time for Indigenous students; policies minimising the delivery of extended curriculum to Community Education Centres, as well as a barely minimal curriculum composed mostly of basic literacy, basic numeracy and sport or hobbies, maintained the circumstances in which around 5000 Indigenous secondary-aged students, according to Australian Parliamentary Hansard (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003) found themselves. The background to

Rosaria growing older in a post-primary classroom was complex and deeply racist at the core. The exercising of power to carry out systematic discriminatory practices through the evolution of specific government policy for Community Education Centres in remote locations was based on the legitimisation of beliefs that prejudged Indigenous children based on perceived deficit attributes such as language and cultural mores, and this amounted to racism. Cole (1997) stated that:

Racism is a process, which can be intentional or unintentional, whereby social relations between people are structured by the significance of human biological and/or cultural characteristics in such a way as define and construct differentiated social groups. Such groups are assumed to have a natural, unchanging origin and status. They are seen as being inherently different and ... as possessing certain evaluated characteristics. Since these evaluated characteristics are stereotypes, they are likely to be distorted and misleading.

Underlying most of the exceptionally poor delivery of Indigenous education is a value system that forms low expectations about the capabilities of Indigenous students; strong and long-standing beliefs about the need for simple and minimal education offerings for Indigenous children; and practices from both leaders and teachers that support those values and beliefs.

■ Leaders contribute to perpetuation of hopelessness

Contributing to the pedagogy of hopelessness has been the creation and maintenance of the unchallenged assumption that there is one approach to teaching a supposed homogenous group known as Indigenous children, which in turn has served to make invisible the diversity within the Indigenous children as a race of young people. Moreover, there is an ongoing discontinuity between this pedagogy and the rhetoric of expected medium to high-level outcomes defined by both Territory and Commonwealth governments. If, for example, Year 3 and Year 5 Indigenous students were not able to access and master the necessary prerequisite mathematical knowledge for the compulsory numeracy basic skills test, then their failure would be assured. If this access was denied over a long period of time, then the failure would be evident as a pattern of outcome for those students. As Mellor and Corrigan note, "Despite improvements in Indigenous education outcomes, and substantial funding, there nevertheless has been no significant reduction in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the last decade" (2004, p. 42).

Without monitoring systems noting the exact educational journey undertaken by each student, the quickly changing teaching force within any remote school is unable to ensure that the requisite

mathematical skills and knowledge are developed in their students rather than repeating material that has already been covered? If how we think about the education of Indigenous students in remote schools remains the same, and the students are thought of as a minority group of homogenous, deficit, post-primary or secondary-aged children, then medium- to high-level outcomes cannot be achieved because the students are prevented from accessing and displaying their capacities and capabilities. They are prevented from displaying their maximum potential.

Each of Australia's State and Territory Education Ministers agreed in 1997 to support the National Goal "that every child leaving primary school should be numerate, and be able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level", and also agreed that "every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years" (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2004). Moreover, despite the establishment of nationally agreed minimum, acceptable standards for literacy and numeracy for each particular year level, and the Northern Territory, like every state of Australia, reporting aggregate student achievement data against these common standards to the Australian community, as well as the analysis of school participation data, Mellor and Corrigan (2004) concluded that "if the level of engagement in education is an indicator of advantage ... the picture of Indigenous life disadvantage depicted by this data is a bleak one indeed" (p. 45).

With educational funding increasingly tied to numeracy and literacy testing with consistently, disappointing results coming from Indigenous students in remote schools in that testing, it is not surprising that the most popular model of educational delivery in a remote school focuses primarily on simple literacy and numeracy. It becomes very easy and often comforting to simply surrender to the pressures of the dominant paradigm and relentlessly pursue the holy grail of improved literacy and numeracy. If, as the Commonwealth Government suggests, our educational focus should be on the development of literacy and numeracy then the structure of a typical school day in a remote school would not surprise the reader. A day in which one portion is for literacy, one portion for numeracy and one portion for having fun, doing sport or other activity-based enterprises might be defined as, not only, as good as it gets, but what the students need.

■ Working towards critical consciousness

The discussion of discriminatory policies and pedagogies based on beliefs of deficit and hopelessness that have shaped the inevitability of educational failure for Indigenous students located in remote communities perhaps leaves the reader overwhelmed

by such bleakness. In late 2001, the principal of the school shared that feeling. However, rather than wait for a government to respond to complex educational problems within the remote context at a systemic level, it became more productive and potentially transformative for school and community leaders at Kalkaringi School in 2002 to consider building new hopeful constructs from the bottom up and from the inside out. Leaders at the school were committed to enacting an educational "project of possibility" (Simon, 1987, 1992) supported by a "pedagogy of possibility" (Giroux & Simon, 1988; Simon, 1987, 1992) as an alternative believing that "if the world of self and others has been socially constructed, it can likewise be dismantled, undone, and critically remade" (Giroux, 1988, p. xix).

In 2002, the main goal for the Kalkaringi School principal, his school council and teacher community was to examine the exact nature of empowering ethos that might operate as an umbrella for the educational pedagogy operating for all the students. This became the foundational challenge around which hopes for transfiguration of their educational circumstance and all aspects within it, was based. Two specific steps were taken to initiate the project. Defining the purpose of schooling and setting goals for achieving such a purpose while acknowledging "the terms of public schooling as part of a wider democratic project" (Giroux, 1988, pp. ix-xx) were crucial first steps. How could discussion and debate take place in a way that harnessed the **capacity of the community**, teachers, students and leaders, **both within** and beyond the community, to **utilise their** "social imagination" (Giroux, 1988, p. xi) to envision and enact "images of that which is not yet"? (Bloch, 1970, p. 87).

The diligent pursuit and embrace of empowering images and hopeful metaphors can be used as a building block for real culture change within any school. What kinds of images are teachers and leaders guided by in order to construct critical educational models of delivery in a remote school? What if through the schooling process, children could become involved in a process of "self-actualization" (hooks, 1994, p. 17) and emerge from their schooling experience as individuals capable and ready for "positively transforming their lives and the world around them" (hooks, 2003, p. xiv) through a model of "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1985)?

An active and critical consciousness enables students to respond actively and with direction towards achieving the kind of real culture change that challenges "the frustrating and debilitating conditions" (Smyth, 1991, p. 17) in which they live. This applies to teachers and leaders as well who, as they become "oriented to the development of an enhanced "consciousness" of their own circumstances", they are able to also to participate actively in reconstructing their work lives (Smyth, 1991, p. 17). In the critical consciousness model at

Kalkaringi School, literacy and numeracy became tools that students developed, utilised and maximised for the greater purpose of increasingly reading the world not just the words (Freire & Dillon, 1985), and increasingly solving problems rather than merely calculating answers. The tools served the purpose of empowerment for freedom. Clearly, skills in reading and writing are crucial enabling tools, however, they do not provide the basis for a model of education. Kalkaringi School viewed them as tools to be used within a model of education. The concern about a simple skills-based model of education was that, as Paulo Freire (1985) would say, students will be able to read the words, yes, but they may not have what they need to understand the impact of those words on themselves and their community. They may have a job, but that does not mean that will be motivated to come every day. The simple skills-based model "continue[s] to sustain and maintain conditions that effectively thwart reflective processes" (Smyth, 1991, p. 15) thereby failing to develop a critical consciousness within both teachers and their students.

The depth of the challenge was increased substantially with a closer investigation of what was happening to the so-called post-primary students. Through the establishment of a new school council and the appointment of an Indigenous community liaison leader working closely in partnership with the principal, it became apparent, through discussions with parents and care-givers of the children attending Kalkaringi School, that they were genuinely unaware that their children were denied their full educational entitlement, and that no Australian child should be denied access or equity to education. They were aware that children in other more mainstream schools completed a different kind of education, but they were convinced that the differences in educational delivery defined the status quo. How would a parent know about all that was possible for their child if their own experiences reinforced the view that school was a place in which children never moved past the post-primary identity, never completed senior secondary education and never attended university or had important well-paid jobs? Parents in this community never saw anyone from their community school become a doctor, lawyer, or engineer and most people they knew were unemployed, pregnant or in prison and suffering from a variety of serious illnesses.

In the model of critical consciousness at Kalkaringi School, everything contained within the schooling experience, both inside and beyond the classroom became a catalyst for the development and mastery of attributes, knowledge, skills, understanding and abilities that enabled students to ask and respond actively to the question: "how have things come to be this way?" and to contemplate, reshape and act upon ways of improving the present. A changed future became a possibility. Of course, the journey towards

a critical consciousness requires an all-encompassing commitment from students, leaders and teachers as well as the school council and community members who slowly became partners in this journey, and indeed learned to enjoy the discovery and reconstruction of their own histories and the realities in which they were embedded (Smyth, 1991, p. 2). This is not to say that there were not casualties in this process. There were many. Second order change presented an enormous challenge to those who wished to retain the status quo of the past. Once the partnership members "acquire[d] the capacity to understand, to challenge, and ultimately, to transform their own practices" (Smyth, 1991, p. 2), then behaviour changed, and that which was impossible once, became not only possible, but importantly shaped a new reality. As partners in a "circle of learners" (Horton & Freire, in Bell et al., 1990, pp. 151-152), it was possible to reconstruct aspirations, hopes and dreams. As families learned about what was possible and saw their children's capabilities, capacities, gifts and talents blossom, their hopes and aspirations for their children also blossomed. Kalkaringi community rejected the pedagogy of simplicity and deficit, and challenged the prejudicial and discriminatory policies that were operating, and under which Kalkaringi School was governed. The school community decided that the model of education they wanted for their children would focus on its purpose. At the end of their schooling, the community wanted young people: "who are empowered ... [and] become conscious of their own participation in the creation of knowledge, and of their own critical ability to conceptualise and reconceptualise their experiences of reality" (Meintjes, 1997, p. 66).

■ The metaphor of climbing the educational mountain

Explaining the concept of "critical consciousness" to other teachers, students and their families presented a significant problematic. The leaders of the school believed that an "organizing concept" (Raffe, 2003, p. 4) or metaphor was necessary in order to convey meaning and garner support for the critical model. Raffe (2003) stated in his analysis of the utility of the pathways concept, that "metaphors of travel and movement have pervaded the policy and research literature on youth transitions" (p. 3). The "pathways" metaphor has been used within the education arena in innumerable ways often to convey aspects of debates about the school to work transition. The concept has also been used to convey possibilities for Indigenous people's futures through visual representations in various artworks (Australian Broadcasting Corporation Alice Springs, 2005). Developing and referring to a metaphor has its risks of course including "convey[ing] unintended meanings" (Raffe, 2003, p. 4), and in the case of the metaphor of "pathways",

there were three other reasons, detailed by a range of researchers (Cohen & Ainley, 2000; Dwyer & Wyn, 1998; Evans & Furlong, 1997) why this concept was rejected as an appropriate organising concept for the Kalkaringi project.

The idea of a pathway has the potential to ignore complexity and it can create a mental image of transitions moving in the same direction, implying there is no falling back or alternative means to arrive at the same destination (Raffe, 2003, p. 4). It can also disregard "social structure and inequality" (Raffe, 2003, p. 4) by implying that people select different pathways because they desire to move in different directions, rather than some pathways failing to be "equally accessible to everyone" (Raffe, 2003, p. 4). Finally, the use of the pathways metaphor can suggest that the only transition for students to consider is the one from school to work, rather than representing "family, household or lifestyle transitions" (Raffe, 2003, p. 4) as fundamentally connected to the choices that are made in regard to future employment.

To climb the educational mountain was a metaphor that was developed by one of the school leaders in response to the limitations of the pathways concept, and significantly and powerfully shaped the model of educational delivery at Kalkaringi School. The embrace of this metaphor provided a means for clarity of purpose, and provided a symbol of hope to the community, teachers and students. It returned significance to the capacity of the imagination and its untapped capability:

If a person were completely devoid of all capability of dreaming in this way, if he were not able to hasten ahead now and again to view in his imagination as a unified and completed picture the work which is only now beginning to take shape in his hands, then I find it absolutely impossible to imagine what would motivate the person to tackle and to complete extensive and strenuous pieces of work (Bloch, 1986, p. 10).

■ The metaphor gains momentum

Climbing the educational mountain as a metaphor of hope, truth and strength reminded Gurindji people of their struggle to succeed in the first land rights claim at Wave Hill in 1966 lasting more than eight years. While the notion of education as a pathway had created one road for Indigenous children and another road for non-Indigenous children, the mountain offered something completely different. The mountain was available to everyone and, in its very definition, offered a variety of individual ways that a goal can be achieved, but it introduced a respect and dignity that had never been in any conceptualisation of education presented in the past.

Climbing the educational mountain acknowledged the need for choice – the choice to participate or to sit and watch others actively involved in life. It acknowledged struggle – the struggle to overcome challenges, and the unpredictability of what you cannot foresee. It emphasised the need for support from others while recognising the importance of developing the strength and endurance that lies within every individual. It clarified that searching for knowledge through experiences and an increasing critical consciousness, uses what has been learned from a range of sources from one day to inform and shape the actions on the next.

Why should students climb the mountain? What would students see when they reached the top? As the graduation of the first Northern Territory Year 12 students drew closer in 2003, the students asked about what would follow. What would happen when they reached the top? Many different races and religions have looked to the mountain seeking guidance, strength, clarity, destiny, and like the Tewa Pueblo Indians, the intention to climb must begin far away from the mountain: "Keep your gaze fixed on that mountain, and you will feel the miles melt beneath your feet. Do this, and in time you will feel as if you can leap over bushes, trees, and even the river" (Cajete, 1994, p. 5). In a translation of the Qu'ān made in 1934 (Ali, 1934), the purpose of climbing the mountain was made clear, and provided Kalkaringi staff with greater clarity in regard to further developing the metaphor for Indigenous students and their educational journey: "It is like a traveller climbing a mountain: the higher he goes, the farther he sees." The final contribution to the development of the metaphor was located within the realm of theology: "As we climb a mountain, our visions broaden; we see many things, many routes, whose existence we were unaware of; we see many connections that we could not have possibly made before. As we climb higher, we want to get still higher. There are always other mountains, more difficult, more challenging" (Phansalkar, 2004).

The metaphor of climbing the mountain provided a framework and ultimately a common language for dialogue between leaders; teachers and students; the Principal and the School Council; students and their families; leaders, the media, teachers and their colleagues. Perhaps what was most surprising was that a number of the Indigenous leaders within the school embraced the metaphor and its language of strength and hope, and felt confident to share this in their Gurindji language in other formal and informal settings including in meetings of which they were members such as community council meetings and district health board meetings. Kalkaringi and Daguragu people from both community and school talked about the mountain in daily conversations, in meetings, in student assemblies, and in classrooms and shared the vision, each person gaining greater

clarity and purpose. The mountain was drawn on whiteboards and on scraps of paper as conversations benefited from a visual representation. The metaphor was expanded to consider the bottom of the mountain; the climb towards the top; reaching the top; and life after reaching the top. The mountain metaphor explained the difficulty of visualising another future by describing the position at the bottom looking upwards towards the clouds unable to see the top. If no-one has been to the top then it is hard to create images of things that have not existed before, however the climb towards the mountain top necessitates deep consideration of the treacherous consequences of failure, and rejects any notion of simplicity.

What had not been considered in the early evolution of the metaphor were the treacherous consequences of success. What could not be predicted in the early years were the pressures that would be placed on both students and teachers as the arrival at the top of the mountain top grew closer, and was inevitably to become a reality. The metaphor was expanded and the language of hope painted the mountain climb with broad descriptive brush strokes of possibility. The project of possibility was described by the assistant principal in the following way:

As you travel further up the mountain, the other life seems so far away, and you allow yourself to dream of new things, new futures, and new ways of living that respect your culture and beliefs and at the same time create a modern culture with new dreaming. Once you have commenced such imaginings, a kind of paralysis can suddenly seep into your whole body as you contemplate the changes that must happen for this new vision of the future to come into reality. If for a minute you consider your own delicate position, your threatened comfort, the threatened comfort of others, and you acknowledge the degree of discomfort that you may initiate with another step, many back away, and return to their position at the bottom of the mountain. You climb the mountain to find other mountains, and slowly you seek personal development as a life long learner who shares knowledge with others, thereby re-constructing and contributing to new knowledge and understanding (Hewitson, 2003).

It was difficult for the students, teachers and leaders to know exactly what would happen at the moment when history was changed at the top of the mountain. Despite emphasising that the climb towards the top of the mountain is not carried out to sit at the top and look down on others, once there, students appeared nearly paralysed to move on.

■ Creating hope from asking the right questions

The transformation from pathway to mountain became a means of acknowledging educational entitlement without minimising or making invisible the significant consequences of that entitlement. The term “graduate qualities”, was introduced as a means of making clear the demands on the students if the mountain climb was to be successful. The transmogrification of the treatment of Indigenous students within Kalkaringi School relied on second order change and from 2003–2005, it was clear to the leadership team at Kalkaringi School that transforming student identity was a crucial step and one that would begin the long process of responding to the question of how things had come to be the way they were. A changing student identity was a second order change and was the enabling brick on which a critical consciousness was built and developed, challenging the essentially racist beliefs that had become firmly entrenched in the very fibre of each remote school, particularly in regard to determining who deserved an entitlement to secondary education and how those students should be treated. Behrendt (2003) suggested that:

The tensions between Indigenous Australians and the dominant culture are wrapped up in identity: how Australians see themselves, how they see others and how they want society to respect who they are ... How societies deal with “otherness” and “sameness” will impact on their ability to allow individuals freedom from oppression and enough scope for the exercise of liberty (p. 76).

The concept of “otherness” had been used to discriminate against Indigenous students, limiting the educational delivery in Community Education Centres by portraying cultural difference as an obstacle in Indigenous students’ learning. A crucial part of the project of possibility was declaring that some things that had previously be defined as needing to be the same as other students and schools, in fact, needed to be different and some things that were different in other schools, needed to be implemented in the same way at Kalkaringi. The paradox of “sameness” and “otherness” was a constant challenge to the leaders and staff throughout the project. Student and teacher identity was dramatically reshaped through the introduction of secondary school assemblies; the creation of a secondary student representative council; the nurturing of a secondary school mentor programme in which primary children regularly visited the secondary domain and shared their work with the secondary students and school presentation nights which were hosted by the senior secondary students. Teachers challenged themselves and their students to the achievement of benchmarks and standards

that were equivalent to any other mainstream school from numeracy and literacy benchmarks to Year 12 results.

Critical consciousness and the project of possibility tied to purpose of schooling

The most common question asked of Indigenous families around the education of their children had been – “what do you want your children to do at school?” This question had served to derail any real attempt to improve the outcomes of Indigenous children. The question encouraged discussions about selecting activities to fill up each school day, but failed to engage families in debate and discussion about the consequences, both positive and negative, of their decisions to commit their children to attending their local community school. The emphasis on the “what shall we do to occupy the children each day” type of question perpetuated half truths and untruths that have been communicated to parents for more than two decades, like – if you send your child to school, they can become a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer and work in the community. This is a version of the truth. The simple request on parents to encourage their children to come to school every day failed to make clear the insufficiency of simple attendance at school as a criterion for that level of success. It also failed to disclose the non-negotiable requirement of physical, mental and spiritual fitness, necessary for children to actively, knowledgeably and successfully participate, contribute and achieve in a rigorous and challenging educational environment. Indigenous families have been marginalised as much as their children in terms of failing to receive their entitlement to the educational process. What is their entitlement?

Indigenous families have an entitlement to be considered a partner in their children’s learning. They have an entitlement to opportunities that will increasingly improve their understanding of the connection between their decisions about sending their children to school, and their children’s possibilities for their future. The metaphor or organising concept of climbing the educational mountain produced a way of declaring an educational purpose of freedom and equality, and a commitment towards achieving a common goal with regard to acknowledging consequences for the decision and choices that are made. What was the common goal or the macro objective?

The goal was for all Indigenous children to receive their entitlement like any other Australian, respecting the culture and dignity of every child without prejudgement, deficit thinking or pre-planned futures. The purpose embraced a hope for freedom, a desire to move past the unmonitored storing of unconnected content with little or no understanding. The history of low-level thinking experiences through low-level

intention produced pedagogies reliant on teaching content that starved not only the students’ imaginations of dreams of a better future, but their families as well. The starvation resulted from a failure to engage and nurture the critical consciousness.

The basic skills model of education continues to reduce the educational journey to two pathways – the Indigenous pathway that has led to predetermined ends simple in construction and unchallenging in intent. The alternate pathway of possibility was previously constructed as off-limits to those who resided in remote locations until 2003. The metaphor of climbing the educational mountain changed attitudes, actions, and artefacts that once contributed to their position at the bottom of the mountain.

The project of possibility becomes a reality for Rosaria

In 2003, following significant changes to the culture of her school, as a part-time student, Rosaria successfully passed three Year 12 subjects towards the completion of her Northern Territory Certificate of Education. Her niece who started school during this time attended school around 95% of the time and successfully completed all academic outcomes in seven curriculum areas as a Year 2 student, as well as being awarded the academic prize for 2005. The metaphor of climbing the educational mountain provided access to dreaming of that which was not yet, and then locating ways to achieve the dreams and transform them into reality challenging the prejudice and discrimination that locked students out of their educational entitlement. The metaphor acknowledged that with a greater understanding of the world around them and a capacity to construct new knowledge and understanding through a critical consciousness, many senior Indigenous students arrive at the top of the mountain and realise that:

Only at the end of our exploring that we come to the place where we started and know it for the first time. Or, like fish who discover water only when they leave it, the student is so immersed in current local experience that it is not available to intellectual scrutiny (Egan, 1992, p. 654).

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Robyn Hewitson is currently on secondment from NT DEET as a post-doctoral research fellow at Charles Darwin University in the School of Education, having completed her PhD from Flinders University in South Australia in 2004. Her areas of interest include teacher professional development; Indigenous education; leadership; and critical pedagogy. For most of her career, Robyn has been a teacher and leader in South Australia, specialising in senior secondary education. She was part of the team to conceptualise and deliver the first successful senior secondary programmes for remote Indigenous students in both South Australia (1995–1998) and the Northern Territory (2002–2005).