

Power and Pedagogy in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education- why families and communities matter in pursuing educational justice

Remote Education Systems Lecture #11

UniSA, Magill Campus, November 27, 2016

Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on Kurna land and pay my respects to the elders past present and future. I would also like to acknowledge those Aboriginal people who are here today and the communities you represent. I'm reminded of the recent publication by the Central Land Council which documents the stories of Aboriginal people from right across central Australia titled, 'Every hill got a story'. Wherever you go across this country, there are ancient and continuing connections held in the stories and the lives of Aboriginal people. So here we are, in this time and in this place, acknowledging the Kurna people and stories of this land, as we wrestle with questions of how education can both honour and strengthen the people and stories of the land – wherever they might be.

Introduction

In today's lecture, I want to share some of the findings of the Remote Education Systems (RES) project I'm working on along with my colleagues Associate Professor John Guenther (Flinders University) and Dr Samantha Disbray (CDU) as well as sharing from work undertaken within my PhD thesis which is currently in the submission process.

RES Project Overview

The Remote Education Systems project within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation is a five year project designed to investigate how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations, aspirations and needs. It identifies strategies and models that will improve outcomes for students and their families. We are in the final stages of the project and have engaged with a wide range of remote education stakeholders, with a particular focus on the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia.

Four research questions underpin the research:

- RQ1 What is education for in remote Australia and what can/should it achieve?
- RQ2 What defines 'successful' educational outcomes from the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
- RQ3 How does teaching need to change in order to achieve 'success' as defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
- RQ4 What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?

The RES project has engaged more than 1000 stakeholders through a range of forums including: local language community surveys; Thinking Outside the Tank (TOTT) workshops covering a series of topics; formal presentations and publications, and the work continues

through partnerships with education stakeholders including four partner universities, and through schools and departments in the government and non-government sectors. We've also had an actively engaged Advisory Group with diverse representation, particularly from Indigenous organisations, from around the country. We're grateful for all our partners' contributions.

For my part, a particular focus has been on working with Anangu (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara) educators and community members through in depth interviews, joint presentations and supporting work through to publication as a means to privileging remote voices in remote education spaces (see for example, Burton & Osborne, 2014; Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014; Minutjukur et al., 2014; Osborne, 2013, 2015; Osborne et al., 2014; Tjitayi & Osborne, 2014).

Brief explanation/summary of Lecture series

This is the 11th and final lecture in a series that we hope will contribute to remote education debates and discourse nationally and we will publish an eBook from the series that can be used in a range of ways, including, to assist undergraduate teaching programs and students who are preparing for remote teaching.

Some of the topics include: Challenging notions of disadvantage and advantage; complexity and chaos in remote education systems; quality teaching, quality teachers and teacher qualities; community engagement; and contextually responsive schools.

A bit about me

Having just returned to Adelaide after nearly 14 years living in remote central Australia, it's probably worth briefly introducing myself as there are a number of UniSA and other colleagues here who I'm just getting to know. I completed a Bachelor of Teaching in 1996 and a Bachelor of Education in 1997 here at UniSA Underdale, majoring in Aboriginal Education, including three semesters of Pitjantjatjara language under the tuition of the late Bill Edwards and Mrs Tur, along with Sandra Ken and Mrs Kunmanara Ken. I worked in Adelaide based schools teaching Pitjantjatjara language among other things before heading to Ernabella Anangu School in 2002 where I took a Junior Secondary class before working as Deputy Principal and Principal until 2008. In 2009 we moved to Alice Springs where I began my PhD and worked for the Principals Australia Institute program Dare to Lead. I began working in research and evaluation projects, but also got roped in to corporation interpreting for a number of boards including Nyangatjatjara Aboriginal Corporation and the Central Land Council's Uluru Rent Money Community Development program, working with Traditional Owners and communities in the southern region of the Northern Territory. I also sat as an advisory board member of the Warlpiri Education Training Trust (WETT) from 2012-2014. Since 2011 I have been working as a Senior Research Fellow at UniSA within the CRC REP and in the next couple of weeks, I hope to have submitted my PhD thesis focusing on education in the tristate area of central Australia. From next week I will be officially located within the School of Education based at Mawson Lakes.

Power and the policy context in remote education

Today I'd like to give some background on the nature of historical and continuing unequal power in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and to suggest a few key ideas that are useful in thinking about how institutions, researchers, educators and remote communities might begin to renegotiate this relationship in informing remote education practise. To be clear from the outset, I don't want to perpetuate ideas of remote Aboriginal communities being behind, somehow lesser or incapable. Today I'm looking at Western education which is ordered and resourced by government policy, informed by research and enacted largely by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. In this context, remote communities lack the delegated authority to make decisions about how education might strengthen local aspirations and by and large, resources remain controlled by the institutions of government.

Indigenous policy is recognised as a site of continuing unequal power between Aboriginal people and government institutions to the point that some Indigenous scholars reject the language shift from describing this space as colonial to neo-colonial, arguing that the nature of power relationships, particularly in remote areas remains decidedly colonial. To give some current examples that inform this sense of colonialist engagement, here are some recent headlines concerning remote Aboriginal Education:

'Indigenous kids should go to boarding schools: Langton' (ABC, 2013), 'Benefits threat for parents as truancy returns to APY Lands' (Martin, 2014a), and 'We have got to stop the abuse' (Martin, 2014c) [emphasis mine].

These types of headlines are interesting, not because I'm suggesting that it is wrong to address difficult issues, but because they position remote Aboriginal people and their communities as lesser and that somehow 'we' need to rescue them from themselves before it's too late. This is why I agree with Indigenous scholars such as Tracy Bunda who suggested at one of our AARE presentations that there's no 'neo' about it. That is, little has changed in the colonial context of relationships between remote Aboriginal Australians and the institutions of power. The other element that has been a consistent message from the Commonwealth is that 'parity' is achievable, and that it is up to Aboriginal people to get with the program and get equal. This is succinctly outlined by Andrew Forrest in his 2014 Indigenous Training and Jobs Review (Forrest, 2014) in stating, 'Almost half of our first Australians have already stepped up and are not disadvantaged' (n.p.). Two things jump out from this kind of statement: Firstly, Aboriginal people belong to 'us', and secondly, they are wholly responsible for their own advantage or disadvantage. I'm not sure that Malcolm Turnbull has such a simplistic view of socio-economic advantage though, explaining to the Australian parliament, 'I don't believe my wealth, or frankly most people's wealth, is entirely a function of hard work' (Farr, 2015 n.p.). In other words, Turnbull recognises that issues of wealth and power are structured within a much wider frame than individuals can generally influence.

Another lens for looking at the nature of these relationships is to look at what resources are being allocated to remote education and what they hope to achieve. Following the 2014 Wilson review (2014) which looked at Indigenous education across the Northern Territory,

Commonwealth resources are now focused on three priorities in the very remote regions of the Northern Territory: These include RSAS, a large-scale attendance program which has just been extended for another 3 years; the winding back of local community provision of secondary education and prioritising boarding schools; and the roll out of Direct Instruction based on the Cape York model developed by Noel Pearson. All three of these examples are ideologically aligned to Closing the Gap policies which are founded on the notion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are behind, and in education terms, should achieve the same outcomes as other Australians on measures of school attendance and NAPLAN scores, all things being equal.

The problem with narrowing funded priorities to boarding schools, Direct Instruction in English, and paying local people to chase kids from the store, oval, creek beds and outhouses into school is that not enough attention is paid to what schools are offering and whether there is a demand for the education product. It is assumed by policy makers located on the coastal fringe of the nation that they know what is best for remote communities and that they are best placed to make decisions on improving remote people's lives. Half in jest, I have come to call this tendency, 'The curse of the externally imagined'.

The RES project is specifically designed to investigate what remote education stakeholders demand from an education. Our work focussed on the three jurisdictions of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, although we touched into other jurisdictions at various times. We didn't work in the Torres Strait Islands and the data only represents Aboriginal communities and voices, which is why I will often use the term 'Aboriginal' exclusively in today's lecture. Some clear priorities emerged from data collected across a number of forums, including 46 focus groups and interviews with more than 250 remote education stakeholders. The priorities that our participants and stakeholders suggest education should sustain and strengthen in various ways include: Aboriginal identity and a sense of belonging, Aboriginal languages, connection to country and local cultures, English language literacy and numeracy, to be confident in a range of social contexts (often described as being strong in two worlds), and to assist young people in finding meaningful work.

These ideas aren't necessarily cutting edge or ground-breaking. Looking back over more than 40 years of remote education, various literatures show that Aboriginal people have been expressing similar aspirations since the arrival of Western education in remote communities (see, for example Bat et al., 2014; Graham, 1999; Nicholls, 2005). But the question is whether these voices are heard or given room in actually shaping the nature of remote education.

In my Doctoral Thesis, I argue the need for what Donna Haraway describes as 'power-sensitive conversation' (Haraway, 2004). The language of consultation, listening to the community and engagement are all sentiments that sound like those in power are being responsive to the needs of the communities they serve, but unless there is an awareness of, and sensitivity to significant points of power and epistemic difference, these interactions can be inept, even damaging. Consider the fact that even wars have rules of engagement, where targets are identified and, well... 'engaged'.

Here's what one RES participant had to say about frustrations with the rhetoric of engagement:

I think one of the key reasons why it hasn't been successful is because the education department per se have not established relationships with the communities. They have it down in their manifesto that community engagement is really important but I very rarely see it happening. They haven't made it a priority.

Gillian Cowlshaw (1998) reflects on the historical period referred to as 'self-determination' following the 1967 referendum. This was the era of remote communities being established and land rights. Cowlshaw (1998) describes what she considers to be an era of 'ventriloquism', where:

Government officials, pastoral advisers and accountants acted as ventriloquists in relaying to each other and to their superior officers the views and wishes of 'the community', which in fact originated in their own minds and were formulated in their own style (p.153).

Listening to Aboriginal people and communities is an important part of a commitment to 'more-just' (Brennan & Zipin, 2008) practice in remote education, but listening across points of significant cultural, epistemic and power difference has ethical and methodological implications if social and economic justice is to be the goal of education endeavour.

Another RES participant described frustrations about not feeling listened to, stating:

People don't believe anymore that anybody listens and there have been people saying well what about this, why won't you listen to us? It doesn't register.

If 'listening' isn't sensitive to issues of power and epistemology and does not privilege local voices and aspirations which should deeply inform and re-shape the nature of remote education, then such a process can contribute to increasing the distance in power between institutions and remote communities. Power-laden 'listening' can look like a government minister flying to three remote communities in a day to conduct a 'listening' process through a microphone, allowing only a short time for questions and answers before racing back to the airstrip. Power-laden 'listening' looks like tokenistic processes of cursory consultation such as the ventriloquism that Cowlshaw describes, where dialogue is merely a process for confirming what had already originated in the minds of institutional representatives. A senior Ernabella man probably summarised these issues of structural power best when he described a regional governance body as a black tree with white roots.

In 2011 I was working in the Warlpiri community of Yuendumu with a group of Yapa (Warlpiri) community researchers when a situation occurred that explains what I mean about moving beyond cursory consultation. At that time, attendance at the local school was little better than 30% in the primary and close to 10% in the secondary. Yuendumu School has a proud history of community involvement and bilingual education and the community researchers wanted to look at how they could help turn things around at school. So I set up a mock interview to model the kinds of ways we could go about our research. I wanted to begin a conversation about methodology and getting beyond what Liberman (1980) calls 'gratuitous concurrence', where participants attempt to mirror what they think the

researcher wants to hear. I've explained this situation more fully in my paper, 'The trouble with hearing' (Osborne, 2014), but this is how the trial interview unfolded which the participants took very seriously:

SO: Why do you think education is important for children in Yuendumu?

Participant: So they can learn to read and write and be strong in two cultures and get a job.

SO: And do you think children should go to school every day?

Participant: Yes.

SO: Whose responsibility is it for making sure children are at school every day?

Participant: The parents. ... I think it's the parents.

SO: What do you think should happen if children aren't attending school?

Participant: I think maybe the police should go and see the parents or maybe the parents should lose their Centrelink [welfare] payments.

At this exact moment, a young lad around 14 years old wandered into our workshop room and I recognised him from a community in South Australia, around 800 km away. 'What are you doing here?' I asked. He gestured towards the woman I had just been interviewing and continued on his way around the table towards the food, without making eye contact with anyone in the room. I waited for someone to fill me in, but nobody made eye contact with me or with the boy, and so I assumed they didn't know him and so, being 'Mr. Helpful' I felt I should 'make the links'. 'Everybody, this is Shane from South Australia'. At this point, the woman turned towards me and said, 'Sam, this is my son Shane. I gave him away as a baby to be raised in South Australia, but now he's come back to get to know the family and I'm looking after him'.

Now this all happened in the middle of a school day, not more than 100 metres from the school gate. The conversation that followed went something like this:

'But you just said that kids should be at school every day!'

'Yeah but it's not like that.'

'But you just told me that if kids aren't going to school, the parents should be held responsible.'

'Yeah, but it's not like that', she persisted.

'But I have the 'evidence' to send to Canberra that 'proves' it's *exactly* like that – and now I'm wondering whether I should take you to the police station or the Centrelink office first'.

At this point, a senior man in the group felt I'd had my fun and now it was time to step in. 'You don't understand, that's not Yapa way', he said authoritatively.

'Well then', I responded, 'let's talk about what is Yapa way'.

For the next two to three hours, we talked about Warlpiri values and how they are informed by thousands of years of desert socialisation, values that are in conflict with Western values at certain points, and in particular, stand in opposition to the logic of punitive actions against parents whose children aren't attending school regularly. To give one small example, one woman in the group explained that forcing a child against their will is not the mother's role in the family structure. The woman would be considered to be a bad mother and could expect an intervention from other family members as punishment for being derelict in her duties as a mother within the Warlpiri values system.

Any attempts to work with her son to bring him into school needs to be a much wider family conversation to ensure that those with the delegated authority to give firm direction to the lad are involved in the process. And in the policy context, questions of whether school is attractive to young Warlpiri lads remain largely undisturbed.

Current policy approaches resource school attendance officers and in the case of the School Enrolment and Attendance Measures, or SEAM program, there are levers for cutting welfare benefits to parents of children who are not attending regularly (Martin, 2014a; Wright et al., 2012). We know these programs don't actually achieve lasting change in attendance. The SEAM evaluation shows that while parents are humbugged by the truancy officers, the kids will go to school. The moment they go away, things go back to 'normal'. Such approaches place parents such as the mother I interviewed at Yuendumu in an impossible situation where she is wedged between implied threats from the authorities over her son's attendance at school and a cultural and familial structure that she is obliged to comply within as a Warlpiri woman and a participant in Warlpiri society. Power-sensitive dialogue is needed to understand the limitations of simplistic policy assumptions and to negotiate alternatives within the local community context.

Lisa Delpit describes the process of ethical 'listening' across points of epistemological and ontological difference as 'painful', urging educators that:

to do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (Delpit, 1993, p.139)

It is difficult for educators and education systems, anchored as they are in their own epistemological, ontological and axiological foundations, assumptions and experiences of the world to come to terms with the needs and context of what Delpit (1993) calls 'educating other peoples' children'. Simply reproducing what makes sense in a Western, urban, middle class education consigns Indigenous peoples and other minority communities the world over to claims for recognition (Fraser, 2001). That is, they are left with the single request asking institutions of power to recognise their right to retain distinct and unique

epistemologies, languages and identities and that these identities are worthy of being sustained rather than erased through the education process.

Makinti Minutjukur (in Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014, p.19) expresses a 'willingness to embrace the ... power that [Western] education offers, but... emphasize[s] that this is not a case of "cut and run"'. She goes on to say that 'As Anangu, we have our own power that we wish to retain and this power is to be carried forward in the pursuit of the power that education offers' (p.19).

One of the key conclusions of my Doctoral Thesis is that there are few venues for Anangu voices to be heard on their own terms within Anangu education dialogue and I argue for power-sensitive (Haraway, 2004) dialogue that privileges Anangu voices in setting the agenda in Anangu education across the tristate area. I'm not talking about meetings or governance structures necessarily, but opportunities to direct and shape what is to be learned, how this might happen and to what end. This is where Delpit argues that

... 'appropriate education' [in this context]... 'can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture. ...[P]arents, teachers, and members of [these] communities must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest' (Delpit, 1993, p.138).

The full participation in education dialogue that Delpit proposes has few examples in remote education where remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are positioned as subordinate in the dialogue and in policy terms, communities live under the curse of the externally imagined, where decisions about what is best for children in remote communities are made a significant distance from the local community context in every sense of the word distance.

A few weeks ago, South Australia's Education Minister Susan Close announced support for a new bilingual school in Adelaide on the ABC's drive program. If you've been around remote education, you will probably be familiar with this term as being close to the hearts of many remote communities who have argued for bilingual schooling for more than 40 years. But this announcement was in relation to bilingual instruction in Chinese. When ABC presenter Michael Smyth asked, 'who's asking for this?', (in other words, what is the community demand?), the minister replied, 'no one'. When asked, 'Where will the school be located?' the minister suggested that they will put the idea out there and see if a school will volunteer. The minister explained that such an education approach was seen to be in the long term social and economic interest of the state and could be a great idea. It was a fun and light-hearted chat, but with actions and resources already determined.

This stands in stark contrast to the context of remote education where communities such as Yirrkala, Yuendumu and Areyonga in the Northern Territory have had to stare down directives towards English only instruction, including the latest push towards Noel Pearson's Direct Instruction model and continue to advocate for their own language and community priorities, which remain largely un-resourced and unsupported by the system. In the case of Areyonga in the south west of the Northern Territory, they took their fight to the United Nations as a matter of Human Rights to include their language and knowledge in the

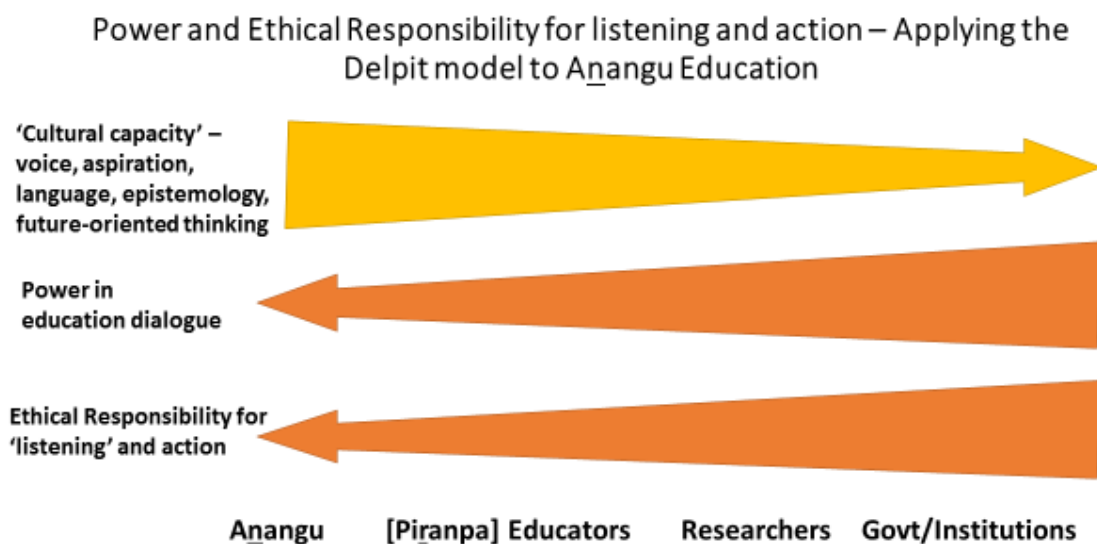
education process (Simpson et al., 2009). Remote communities, Indigenous scholars and other academics (Disbray, 2014; Graham, 1999; Nicholls, 2005; Osborne et al., 2014) have demanded, pleaded and argued for bilingual approaches in their communities, but as it is not in the perceived long-term social and economic interest of the state (see, for example Wilson, 2014), such calls have fallen on deaf ears since the late 1990s. It seems that only once a language is endangered or virtually lost that funding and support for languages in education returns to being a good idea, often as a tool for re-engagement of Aboriginal children at risk. All of this indicates the challenges remote community voices face in being heard in education dialogue.

Daryl Rigney and Steve Hemming (2014) argue that ‘Closing the Gap’ measures do not meet Ngarrindjeri community expectations of what social and economic justice looks like, arguing:

the dislodging of the Ngarrindjeri political agenda with policies such as Closing the Gap and practical reconciliation weakens the possibilities for a truly transformative reconciliation that takes account of improving the socioeconomic position of Ngarrindjeri people...(p.540-541).

Delpit’s (1993) work on ethical obligations for listening in educating ‘other peoples’ children’ offers a framework for negotiating dialogue across power differences in remote education. In my Thesis, I have taken up Delpit’s (1993) notion that greater ethical responsibility for ‘listening’ and initiating dialogue lies with those with the most power.

This diagram describes the kind of model for listening and action that Delpit outlines:



Currently, the institutions of government hold the most power for deciding what is to be taught, how it should be taught and what a remote education is for, but tend to hold others responsible for the perceived failure, or powerlessness of their own programs (see Abbott, 2015; Forrest, 2014). Under this model of ethical listening and action, venues should be explored for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to speak on their own terms, that

is, for power-sensitive dialogue (Haraway, 2004) and then the institutions need to act by stepping back and supporting the aspirations of communities.

As I have described in the Yuendumu example earlier, researchers also have significant power in representing and validating what is believed to be true about Indigenous peoples, a point that has been made strongly and clearly the world over by Indigenous scholars such as Linda Smith (2012), Irabinna Rigney (1999), Russel Bishop (2011), Martin Nakata (2007), Veronica Arbon (2008), Aileen Moreton-Robinson (1998) and Linda Ford (2010) just to name a small fraction of these voices. Indigenous scholarship needs to be central in informing research methodologies in remote education research and the RES project has attempted to work from the arguments Indigenous scholars have made in relation to power and research generated representations of Indigenous voices. Privileging Indigenous voices, epistemologies and scholarship in Indigenous research addresses, in some way, historical and continuing unequal power relationships in Indigenous research. In this regard, relationships are critical because without trusting and power-sensitive relationships, it is impossible to get at any truth in Indigenous research activities.

The man in the Yuendumu research workshop summed it up perfectly when he said, 'I know that your research has just "proven" this and that, but that's not Yapa way'. To help and not hinder Indigenous peoples in their pursuit of social and economic justice, outside researchers (such as myself) need to think carefully about their own institutional ties and assumptions and be guided by the work of Indigenous scholars in framing research and methodological approaches so that our methodology, aims and audience meets the expectations of the communities we purport to be assisting. Additionally, privileging Indigenous voices in Indigenous research and education dialogue requires outside researchers, educators and officials to understand that choosing not to speak is also, at times, an exercising of power, and this right must be respected if dialogue is to be sensitive to power. There are recent remote research and policy examples where a 'no means no' campaign is almost required to make this point more clearly understood (Bickers, 2015; Rothwell, 2014). For researchers, there are important questions to consider in the context of the Delpit model. Questions like, 'What are the possibilities for remote communities to pursue their own questions of interest that are generated from within the community and strengthen local community aspirations?' (see, for example Appadurai, 2004, 2006)

Delpit also argues that teachers from these communities 'must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest' (Delpit, 1993, p.138). Historically dynamic remote Aboriginal teacher education programs such as Batchelor (BIITE) in the NT, AnTEP here at UniSA, RATEP out of James Cook University in QLD and Deakin's remote teacher training program based in Victoria are facing significant challenges in the current environment where tightened AITSL teacher standards, the Australian Curriculum and a narrow remote education policy focus have all but structured the majority of remote educators out of the possibility of becoming a qualified teacher and shaping the nature of education in their local community. Universities need to think carefully about how they will plan to privilege local educators, voices, languages and

epistemologies in this context, both within remote teacher preparation programs, but also in how local priorities are advocated for in the discourse as well as in the research agenda.

Remote educators are in a difficult position in that they are somewhat caught between the demands of the communities they are working and living in and the upward accountability environment (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) of the system they work within. Despite a feeling of limited influence, they still hold more power than remote Aboriginal community members in education dialogue. As Delpit describes, 'Issues of power are enacted in classrooms' and, "... are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power'. Despite the fact that in remote communities, nearly all of the students will speak local languages before English, teachers inevitably reproduce implicit social and academic codes, often as a cloudy mirror of the kind of school environment they grew up in.

In this sense, remote classrooms can operate as an island of culture where teachers, rather than families and communities determine what a remote education is for, and therefore what and how learning should occur. As part of my Doctoral thesis, I worked closely with eight Anangu participants where I asked them to talk about young people, education and the future. I then asked them to suggest non-Anangu (Pirānpa) educators I could interview whom they considered to have been successful in taking account of Anangu standpoints (Nakata, 2007) in their work. These educators are experienced, respected and ethical practitioners who often showed awareness of the power implications of their own position and worked hard to privilege local people and aspirations in their work from the 1950s through to current practitioners. The first thing that was interesting was that these educators often didn't feel very successful on the one hand, but many described success in terms of involving the children's families and communities in learning activities, in and outside of the classroom. Many of these educators, particularly those who have been teaching over the last couple of decades described great frustration at requirements to be responsive to institutional priorities which often work in opposition to local community aspirations.

And finally, across the tristate area, Anangu voices are positioned as least powerful in education dialogue. As I suggest in the diagram, it is Anangu who hold the expertise in terms of Anangu epistemology, histories and language. It is Anangu who hold the cultural capacity of aspiration, voice and future oriented thinking (Appadurai, 2004) in the Anangu context and it is Anangu who understand their children best. So often, remote communities and families are described in terms of being 'the problem' or a disadvantage to somehow be ameliorated (see Good to Great Schools Australia, 2014; Wilson, 2014) through interventions, closing gaps and philanthropic endeavour (see, for example AIEF, 2013; Forrest, 2014).

Anangu need to seek venues for dialogue across the various standpoints (Nakata, 2007), between and amongst Anangu, engaging with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints and with the institutions. And then it is up to the institutions, those with the most power, to listen in the sense that Delpit describes and support community demands and aspirations by resourcing them.

Katrina Tjitayi is an experienced education leader in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands and outlines her concept of Closing the Gap in this way:

There are many gaps in our children's spirits and they can't close them on their own... When a child is afraid, he can't learn. This is the way we can close the gaps.

The child is in the middle and his family are around him... When the family watches over him, the child feels secure. The mother and father can help the child to be brave and to learn new things.

Our children need to learn together with us as one spirit. Our spirits are like a solid rock for them to stand on (Katrina Tjitayi, in Osborne, 2015, p.11).

I'll close here with a segment from Makinti Minutjukur's 2014 Garma presentation (Minutjukur et al., 2014) where she summarised education activities across the APY Lands including attendance initiatives, Trade Training and employment opportunities, boarding school programs and so on, but is careful to explain:

In all of these situations, the family provides the support, the encouragement and the motivation for success. Our families are united and strong through our shared foundation of Anangu culture, our traditional stories and law, and our country. When everyone works together starting from the strong foundation of children's families, we have a chance of succeeding. You can't come in from the outside and make decisions. The family needs to decide what should be strengthened and what changes need to be made... (p.159).

Pursuing patient and power sensitive dialogue in remote education takes time and requires a different ethical/methodological approach to what we are currently seeing in remote education policy and practise. But it's worth pursuing because for remote communities, the future depends on it.

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