

# ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF SCHOOLING IN VERY REMOTE AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

John Guenther

*Flinders University/Cooperative Research Centre-Remote Economic Participation*

Gina Milgate

*Australian Council for Educational Research*

Peter O'Beirne

*Principals Australia Institute, Dare To Lead*

Sam Osborne

*University of South Australia/ Cooperative Research Centre-Remote Economic Participation*

## Abstract

*Schools in very remote Australia, where the students are mainly of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, are often characterised as failing or behind with intractable problems. The recent Northern Territory Review of Indigenous Education makes just that point: "These children, who have been the focus of improvement efforts for a decade and more, are still left irretrievably behind almost as soon as they start school" (Wilson, 2014, p. 11). The author, in his letter to the Minister, describes the problems of Indigenous education delivery as 'intractable'. A critical examination of these statements and several more like it, would show that 'behind' is inevitably a judgement based on a set of assumptions and values that are not necessarily shared by those they talk about. But what do the students and families themselves say about their vision and expectations of their future, how they see success and how they view their experiences of school?*

*This paper reports on the findings and discusses the implications emerging from an evaluation of 31 very remote Australian schools with 80+ per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment. It is based on a series of 'Collegial Snapshots' conducted by Dare to Lead (a project of Principals Australia Institute) between 2009 and 2013. The Snapshots sought the perspectives of 672 participants as either school leaders, Aboriginal Assistants, classroom teachers, students or parents and carers. Analysis of the data looking through a lens of aspiration, success and school experience, carried out with the support of the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) adds to the findings of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's Remote Education Systems project.*

*The findings presented here, provide valuable insights into the perceptions of local people in remote communities and how they compare with the non-locals. Not surprisingly there are some marked differences in the way that locals and non-locals view their experiences and expectations of schools and their views about the future. The paper aims to unpack implications for educators, school leaders and education systems as they grapple with the challenges of working with remote communities to get the best outcomes for students and families. In particular the diverging opinions point to a need to carefully re-examine of the claims and discourse of disadvantage and challenge the notion of who has the intractable problem.*

## Introduction

As part of its Remote Education Systems (RES) research project, the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to work with Principals Australia Institute (PAI) to conduct a detailed analysis of its *Collegial Snapshots* conducted in very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. ACER and PAI had a pre-existing partnership arrangement and had

worked together to publish findings from all the *Collegial Snapshots* conducted in schools across Australia (Milgate & Giles-Brown, 2013). The CRC-REP's intent was to capture the voices of community members in very remote schools to deepen the RES project's understanding of various aspects of remote education, particularly in relation to aspiration and success, as well as their expectations of the schooling experience. This work complements research being conducted more generally about the nature of community aspirations and success through the RES project (Burton & Osborne, 2014; Osborne & Guenther, 2013).

The purpose of this paper then, is to highlight the findings of the Collegial Snapshot analysis in the 31 very remote schools that PAI conducted between 2009 and 2013 through its Dare to Lead initiative. It is also to draw out implications that could be used by teachers, school leaders and school systems.

## Definitional and scope considerations

The context for the RES project is very remote Australia, and in particular the communities in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders live. The use of 'very remote' is defined in terms of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) remoteness structure (ABS, 2011). The population of very remote Australia is sparsely distributed across an array of landscape types: from deserts to tropical coasts. What works well in cities, often does not work so well in remote contexts.

The RES project is particularly concerned with those schools that have more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Island students. From My School (ACARA, 2014), we have identified 159 such schools that are located in Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales. The 31 schools examined in the analysis presented here are a subset of those 159 schools.

## Background: the *Collegial Snapshot* process

The *Collegial Snapshot* process is the medium that Dare to Lead has used to collect data from the school community in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Information was collected from eight groups including: school leaders; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; parents and carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff; teachers; other students; other parents; and support staff.

During the *Snapshot* process in an individual school, no participants are identified in the gathering of the data or in the data itself. When data from across schools was collated, no individual school or participant was identified. In this report, no individual or school has been identified. All schools were de-identified through the analysis process.

## Literature

### The basis of a 'good education' in Australia

The philosophical and theoretical bases for establishing strategic policy directions in education are diverse. The associated strategies and performance measures for monitoring 'success' reflect sometimes divergent views about what education is really for. This paper does not allow for a detailed discussion of the theoretical and philosophical foundations of education (for a more detailed discussion see Guenther, 2013). However, it may be helpful to briefly outline some of the key foundations on which departmental visions, goals and objectives, are based. In essence, we are exploring the question that Biesta (2009) asks: 'what makes a good education?'

*There is a social and societal rationale for education.* There are various social theories that underpin education systems. Education has been seen as a vehicle for social control (Dewey, 1938) and for the promotion of citizenship (McCowan, 2010). Others have described education as transformative and emancipatory and a vehicle for social justice and human rights (Freire, 1970; Oakes et al., 2013).

Education too, is seen as a process that builds ‘social capital’ (Coleman, 1988).

*There is a developmental rationale for education.* The international discourse around education and development suggests strongly that better education leads to increased levels of development (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007). The empirical evidence that education and learning is related to a range of benefits including social equity (Field et al., 2007), health (Ross & Mirowsky, 2010), justice and criminal behaviour (Weatherburn, 2014), family and individual outcomes (Schuller et al., 2004) is readily available in an array of literature.

*There is a knowledge and skills rationale for education.* There is a view that knowledge is an end in itself, that one of the primary aims of education is epistemic (Robertson, 2009), that for educators it is reasonable to expect that it is ‘possible, and desirable for people to *know and do* things, and to engage in and take seriously the fruits of *rational inquiry*, where such inquiry is understood to involve the pursuit of *truth*’ (Siegel, 2010, p. 283).

*There is an economic rationale for education.* The economics of education has come to the fore in recent decades. A notable contribution to the field was Becker’s (1964) work *Human Capital: a theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*, which brought together ideas of return on investment in education and distribution of income on the basis of educational attainment. Human Capital Theory has a strong influence in Australian education and economic policy (Banks, 2010), articulated in documents, such as the Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, 2013).

The question though for us is ‘how do these understandings of a good education intersect with the perspectives of remote communities?’. We will return to this later in the discussion, but let us first consider how the concepts of aspiration and success are interpreted firstly from the philosophical positions mentioned above, and then from the position of those who live in remote communities.

### Aspiration and success in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island schools

Remote teachers are frequently non-Indigenous and are generally raised and educated non-remote contexts where the social and cultural norms of the school as well as the understanding about what education is for tend to closely mirror the values of the home situation. Indigenous scholars such as Nakata (2007a), Rigney (1999) and Arbon (2008) strongly emphasise that Indigenous epistemologies, axiologies, ontologies and cosmologies stand in stark contrast to western, dominant culture norms.

Remote teachers often recite to their students the logic of aspiration and educational success that makes sense to them from their own experience of education: ‘if you come to school every day, you can learn to read and write, then finish school, then maybe go away and do some more study and then come back to help your family and community’. This may make sense from the teachers own experiences, but as Rueben Burton explains in Burton and Osborne (2014),

*The parents hold the future for the children. Piranpa [non-Aboriginal] teachers hold “keys” to the future, but they don’t understand Anangu [Pitjantjatjara] ways, so it’s Anangu that give the future to their children. (p.4)*

Tjitayi (in Burton & Osborne, 2014, p. 5) describes how Anangu youth view the future through the lens of family and aspirational family members. A sense of aspiration is described as following in the footsteps laid down by the generations gone before. This affirms Burton’s (in Burton & Osborne, 2014) statement in highlighting the stark contrast and lack of complicity in future oriented education conversations that take place between non-Indigenous remote teachers and their students:

*...teachers come and talk about the children’s future: “Where is your future? What is your goal?” The whitefellas talk with the children, but they can’t understand. (p.8)*

Given these differences in the broader philosophical underpinnings of identity, education and future-oriented imagining (see Nakata, 2007b), a key question that remains for the Remote Education

Systems project is, ‘what is a remote education for?’ As Nakata et al (2012) explain, the Western/Indigenous knowledge binary should not be seen as a polarised end point, but it is important that remote educators take account of these points of difference and equip themselves with pedagogical tools to engage at the interface for the enabling of new possibilities for Indigenous young people through education.

### Standpoint and position within remote schools

Emerging in the field of feminist scholarship, standpoint theory has been applied and argued from a range of marginal positions, including Nakata’s (1998) articulation of an Indigenous standpoint in Australia. Nakata’s intent was to ‘affirm...the overwhelming intelligence of Torres Strait Islanders and the limitations of Western sciences to understand the human condition.’ (p.11) He also sought to establish a standpoint from which ‘Indigenous students can view their position as viewed by others as a legitimate academic practice.’ (p.11)

Haraway (2004) argues the need for ‘the power of modern critical theories...in order to build meanings...’ (p.580) and to reject ‘reductionist’ approaches ‘when one language (guess whose?) must be enforced as the standard for all the translations and conversions’. (p.580) Whilst the dominant culture paradigm that Haraway refers to is positioned more in terms of gender and class, Nakata applied this theory in terms of Indigenous and Western knowledge and dominant (western) culture inscriptions of the ‘other’ (see S Osborne, 2014).

### Methodology

The analysis presented here builds on a constructivist/interpretivist position drawing on abductive reasoning to analysis data (see Lincoln et al., 2011). The questions asked of participants were generally open ended and allowed participants to respond freely on issues of schooling that were important to them. The questions asked were not specifically about aspiration, success or expectations of the school experience. However, given the open responses, we were interested to see what emerged from the data using these filters. Consistent with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), the data is used to construct theory. Assisting the process, we use a process of quantization, commonly used in mixed methods analysis (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This allows the analysis to determine the relative weight of the evidence—what is most important to participants.

### Research questions

The research questions that determined the analysis process are as follows:

What do very remote school stakeholders say about:

1. young people’s future orientation or aspirations?;
2. what factors influence success?;
3. their expectations of the school experience?; and
4. Is there a difference between what local stakeholders (‘locals’) say compared with those who come in to the school from elsewhere (‘non-locals’)?

From the findings, which respond directly to these questions, we abduce inferences which point to implications for stakeholders.

### *Collegial Snapshot* data collection process and sample

The school community voices illustrated in this report are from 31 very remote schools that have an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait enrolment rate of 80 per cent or higher. The locations include five schools in New South Wales, five in the Northern Territory, five in Queensland, three in South Australia and 13 in Western Australia. Table 1 summarises the sample composition and the number of comments made in the *Collegial Snapshot* process. ‘Comments’ refer to discrete references to a

particular theme.

Table 1. Sample composition and comments.

<i>Group</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>
Classroom teachers	62	2212
School leaders	132	1903
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students	218	1366
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff	87	1310
Parents of Aboriginal and /or Torres Strait Islander students	107	1255
Non Indigenous Parents	13	319
Support staff	31	309
Non Indigenous Students	22	213
TOTAL	672	8887

While all of the comments above were gathered on site within remote and very remote school communities, it is not clear how many of the respondents could be considered as ‘community members’ and as such some caution is advised when the data is analysed and interpreted.

## Data analysis

We use the data to elicit responses to the research questions listed above. To that end, the data from the 31 schools with its 8887 discrete comments, analysed for comments that responded accordingly. Across the dataset we found 1065 comments that discussed contributors to success, 245 that talked about a future orientation and 808 that discussed participants’ expectations of the school experience. Comments were coded according to the emerging themes. Analysis of the data was carried out using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which allowed for the quantization process to be completed.

Where the number of comments represented at least 10 per cent of the total of each group, the comments were assigned an attribute as being from a local or non-local participant. To determine whether there were difference between the groups, a chi-squared test was conducted such that the number of comments were compared with all responses in the three major groupings.

## Limitations

The findings presented here are representative of the 31 schools in which the *Snapshots* were conducted. We are not claiming that the findings are representative of all very remote schools. Beyond this we recognise that in a complex cross-cultural setting where languages other than English are spoken, and where interviewers come from outside the community, gathering data that reflects the perceptions of stakeholders is challenging.

## Findings

The findings presented here are a summary of the comments as they were identified in the thematic

analysis. The comments were a mix of issues raised, problems, expectations, experiences and perceived possibilities. They represent the themes discussed rather than a specific response to a question about aspiration, factors contributing to success or school experiences. When we refer to ‘themes’, we are referring to the categorisations identified through the analysis process. Some explanation of these themes is given in the commentary columns of the tables that follow.

## Future orientation

Table 2 summarises themes identified under the heading of future orientation. Less than three per cent of all comments were identified in this group. The three main themes related to jobs and careers, moving to another community and going to boarding schools. Local stakeholders were more likely than non-locals to raise the issue of jobs and careers, this. Similarly, locals were more likely to discuss concerns about young people moving away from their home community. This theme should not be taken as implying a desire or problem, but rather an issue that was of concern to them. The responses about going to boarding schools were given equal weight by locals and non-locals. There were some respondents who indicated that boarding experiences were good for senior students, but others who suggested boarding options were not working for them.

## Expectations of schooling experiences in remote communities

Table 3 summaries themes identified under the heading of expectations of the school experience. Academic outcomes were most frequently discussed among respondents, but nearly three-quarters of the responses came from non-locals. Similarly, almost three-quarters of the comments about choice and options came from non-locals. Students themselves were most concerned about the school experience being enjoyable. Locals were more concerned about language learning in school than non-locals—more than three-quarters of all 83 responses under this theme were from locals. Complementing this theme are another 65 response related to learning culture.

Parent and community engagement themes together, made up about one in six of all responses. About one in seven of all responses related to boarding transitions or further education and training opportunities. However, of note in the tabulated results is the lack of responses about learning English and western culture.

Table 2. Comments about future orientation

<i>Themes identified</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>			<i>Commentary</i>
	<i>Local stakeholders</i>	<i>Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders</i>	<i>Total</i>	
Jobs/careers	69*	16	85	About three quarters of these specified a particular job/career aspiration, some of which implied further training/study
Moving to another community	48*	7	55	Most parents commented that their children need to be exposed to other communities (including educational experiences)
Going on to boarding schools/colleges	15	13	28	Good for some, but homesickness is a significant factor (about half of these respondents)
Staying in the community			19	Concern about students leaving or staying in the community
No aspiration/goal, unsure of			15	Challenges for young people seeing a future

future				
Cultural/ community roles			10	Interpreted here as respondents describing future community leadership roles by students
Further training			10	TAFE and university options considered
Other			23	More than half of these comments are about access/lack of access to jobs and training in the local community
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>245</b>	

\* Chi-squared test shows a significant difference between local and non-local responses,  $p < .05$

Table 3. Comments about the expectations of the school experience

<i>Themes identified</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>			<i>Commentary</i>
	<i>Local stakeholders</i>	<i>Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders</i>	<i>Total</i>	
Academic outcomes	46*	130	176	Evident that data tracking is commonly in place; about one quarter of comments from a range of respondents say school has 'high expectations'; about one quarter believe their school does not perform as well as other schools
Fun/enjoyment	82*	26	108	82 comments from students, identifying what made school (and learning) 'enjoyable'; whether or not the teacher was perceived as a 'good teacher'
Choice/options	24*	70	94	Half of these comments from school leaders, mostly indicating that there are flexible approaches according to need
Learning language	65*	17	83	Most comments related to having the students learning more about their local language. i.e.: more opportunities to learn their language in the school
Parent engagement			70	Parental engagement was seen as very important especially significant cultural events and days e.g.: NAIDOC Week
Community engagement			66	The majority of respondents illustrated the importance of the community and school having a genuine partnership.
Further education and training			65	Many of the student respondents identified 'teacher' and 'police officer' as a career aspiration
Learning local culture			53	Strong message from students that schools were providing opportunities to learn about the local Indigenous culture. They enjoyed these experiences.

<i>Themes identified</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>			<i>Commentary</i>
	<i>Local stakeholders</i>	<i>Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders</i>	<i>Total</i>	
Transition to boarding school/college			51	About one quarter identified that the transition process could be improved
Leadership development			20	18 comments from students, school leaders and teachers, identifying leadership development opportunities currently in place for students
Learning English			17	Respondents felt the importance of learning both English and cultural language
Learning western culture			5	Very little commentary focusing on Western world views.
Total			808	

\* Chi-squared test shows a significant difference between local and non-local responses,  $p < .05$

### How is success discussed in remote schools?

Table 4 summarises themes identified under the heading of 'success'. There were significant differences between the perceptions of locals and non-locals on the issue of success. Behaviour and behaviour management was a dominant theme, but locals were more likely than non-locals to comment on this. Attendance was also a dominant theme, but in this case it was an issue raised predominantly by non-locals. Culture and language themes were next in order of importance and again, locals were more likely than non-locals to raise these themes in their discussions. After this, health and well-being issues were raised, but in this case the theme was more likely to be raised by non-locals.

Other themes such as community, sport, identity, and feeling comfortable appear further down the list. What is of note however, is the limited number of comments about teachers, teaching or anything to do with academic outcomes. The exceptions are English language competence, teacher continuity, extending kids, and teacher/parent relationships, which together make up less than one-eighth of all comments. In summary, what contributes to successful remote schools depends to a large extent on who is speaking: locals or non-locals.

Table 4. Comments about what contributes to successful schools

<i>Themes identified</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>			<i>Commentary</i>
	<i>Local stakeholders</i>	<i>Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders</i>	<i>Total</i>	
Behaviour/behaviour management	165*	76	241	High levels of awareness that 'policies' are in place; many students and parents comment that the school shows fairness when dealing with incidents and issues

<i>Themes identified</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>			<i>Commentary</i>
	<i>Local stakeholders</i>	<i>Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders</i>	<i>Total</i>	
Attendance	39*	172	211	Overall, this is seen as an area of improvement; factors include family and cultural responsibilities (8), disengagement in class (35)
Culture	66*	52	118	20 comments from AEWs about the need for better cultural awareness/understanding by new staff
Language	66*	20	86	Most commented positively about current home language programs in the school, or the need for one; 12 from AEWs about the need to 'save language'
Health and well-being	16*	66	82	The majority of comments illustrated that health programs such as Breakfast Clubs were good for learners.
Community			60	About one third of these comment on how issues and conflicts in the community impact on the school;
English Language competence	36*	14	50	Most identified programs in place to build students' English language competence
Teacher/parent relationships			45	20 comments about teachers' understanding (or lack of) of the remote community when they arrive;
Sporting opportunities			30	Seen mainly as a hook by students and parents; teachers and school leaders comment more about impact on attendance (e.g. carnivals)
Feeling comfortable			30	One third of comments from teachers focused on parents being comfortable in the school, having a sense of belonging
Building identity			29	School Leaders focused on the school being a place where Indigenous learners felt strong in their culture.
Respect			24	Comments tended to focus on much or lack of respect in school for others. Indigenous students voiced respect for culture.
Teacher continuity			23	
Pride			14	The majority of comments focused on the importance of a visible presence of culture throughout the school and in classrooms.
Safety			12	School identified as a 'safe place' in the community, and minimising conflict
Extending kids			11	Helping kids reach potential

Themes identified	Number of comments			Commentary
	Local stakeholders	Non-Indigenous or non-local stakeholders	Total	
Strong both ways			10	Also implicit in responses about the importance of learning local language and culture at school.
TOTAL			1065	

\* Chi-squared test shows a significant difference between local and non-local responses,  $p < .05$

## Discussion

We return for a moment to the alignment of findings with the various rationales of a good education discussed earlier. One thing that does stand out from the findings (where the disaggregation is provided) is the differing views among locals and non-locals.

In terms of the *social and societal rationale* of education, there is no mention about the transformative, emancipatory functions of education. There are references to social capital (for example in the themes of safety, respect, sport in Table 4 and community engagement in Table 3) and strong suggestions of the development (or need for the development) of cultural capital, expressed in terms of culture and language, particularly from local stakeholders shown in Table 3 and Table 4. The importance of behaviour management (Table 4) as an indicator of success could also fit within the societal and social rationale. Again, this view came predominantly from local stakeholders.

In terms of the *developmental rationale*, there are some limited references to aspects of health and well-being (Table 4), and employment but nothing that speaks directly the hope that education will transform lives. The *knowledge and skills rationale* is reflected most notably in the non-local expectations of academic outcomes and to some extent in the relatively small number of references to further education and training.

The *individual and economic rationale* is reflected in job/career aspirations expressed in a relatively small number of responses in Table 2, mainly by locals. The importance of attendance, expressed by non-locals in Table 4 may also reflect an alignment with assumptions about Human Capital and the importance of an investment in education. Those views were generally not shared by locals. What is perhaps surprising is the lack of comment from non-locals in any of the tables (except the 16 responses in Table 2) about the connection of school with some form of economic engagement. This may point to a tacit assumption that school is largely an end in itself, or that they are preoccupied with what happens in school and find it difficult to see a trajectory beyond school. It may also reflect a focus on primary aged education where what lies beyond school is more school, or training, or boarding school.

### Implications for educators and school leaders

What does this all mean for educators and school leaders? Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators (teachers and support staff) are arguably caught somewhere in the middle of the differing views of the non-local staff members and community members (parents, carers and students). Lester et al (2013) describe a dynamic that is present in remote schools when they suggest that:

*this positions schools located in Red Dirt communities as an island of culture, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can feel somewhat alienated despite being so close to home. (p. 6)*

During school days local educators stand on the island of school and when school is out, they hop off that island. On the one hand this dynamic helps explain the important role that local educators play,

being something of a conduit between school and community, and helping unlock the codes of power that supposedly come from attending school (Tjitayi & Osborne, 2014). On the other hand it explains the critical role a strong local educator can play in translating the codes of the local knowledge system to non-local educators who operate within a different ontological, epistemological, axiological and cosmological paradigm.

The data presented here shows that locals and non-locals hold quite different views about what they think student aspirations are/should be, what they think success looks like, and what their expectations of schooling experiences should be. Non-locals cannot therefore assume that their views of the world are shared by their students or the parents/carers they engage with. Further, what may be important for the school, such as attendance, may not be as important for community members, even though they may say that ‘yes, attendance is important’ (for an example of this see Sam Osborne, 2014, p. 10). We note however, that what guides school leaders is not only their own beliefs or perceptions but the pre-defined goals of their employers.

### Is it possible to build aspiration?

We noted earlier the relatively small number of comments in relation to aspiration or an imagined future. What is reflected in the data is a degree of uncertainty about either moving to another community, staying in community, having a role in the community, getting a job or going on to boarding school or further training and education. While we would caution against interpreting this as a few did in Table 2 who thought that young people had ‘no aspiration’, it may point to uncertainty about what a future orientation looks like, what the words actually mean, or indeed how to get there (see Burton & Osborne, 2014).

The fundamental problems for non-local educators in very remote settings—particularly non-Indigenous educators—are their own ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and cosmologies which may remain invisible to themselves. Could it be that locals’ aspirations to be with family and be on country are simply alternative views of an imagined future, which have equal validity, but which are not valued equally by western and remote cultural systems? Burton and Osborne (2014), speaking of an Anangu context suggest that ‘seeing really is believing’ (p. 37) when it comes to aspiration. If this is true then the future has to be seen to be aspired to. Part of the answer lies in providing what Minutjukur and Osborne (2014) describe as a ‘powerful education’:

*Educators need to take account of the context they work in and to present “powerful” education opportunities for the students they teach ...[they]need to make room in their learning structures to allow intergenerational engagement with families... (p, 21)*

### The role of school in a remote community

Perhaps a bigger question is ‘what is the role of schools in remote communities?’. There are some obvious answers to this question that most locals and non-locals would agree with. It is about teaching and learning and giving young people the foundations they need to maximise their opportunities become good citizens living meaningful productive lives. This response is a somewhat philosophical response that comes out of the literature discussed earlier. However, what emerges from the data presented here (particularly in Table 2) is that the future beyond school in the remote schools examined here is unclear for both locals and non-locals. The data presented on the expectations of the school experience (Table 3) and of success factors (Table 4) are by and large focused on the present without a sense of unified purpose. The sense that school is about preparing young and emerging leaders; preparing young people for economic engagement within or outside the community; promoting excellence in the arts or sport; addressing the rights of young people for social justice and citizenship, is not included to any large extent. Yet, as noted in the literature, these goals are explicitly included in Australia’s goals for education (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008).

While attendance and achievement in English literacy and numeracy are important, the focus of successive governments on these elements of remote schooling has over the years failed. Over recent

years school attendance rates in remote communities have declined and so too has academic performance (Guenther, 2013; Wilson, 2014). Yes it is important to ‘get kids to school’ (Scullion, 2013), but once the kids are at school, do they know what they are there for? Assuming that the current Australian Government strategies to lift attendance work, we believe there is an opportunity to take steps to engage in a bigger conversation with all stakeholders about what remote schools should be about and what locals see as a ‘good school’.

## Preparing non-locals for remote schools

The different perceptions about what is important also suggest a need to prepare non-locals better for their experience and attune them to the differences that perhaps on the surface, may not be immediately evident. There are implications here for universities in their preparation of teachers and departments of education in their induction processes. Understanding the different responses will give new teachers an opportunity to critically reflect on their own ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies and better appreciate that alternative standpoints (as noted in the literature) are possible in the first instance, and to be respected in the second.

## Conclusions

The analysis presented in this paper set out to respond to four questions relating to very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island student populations: 1) what does aspiration look like?; 2) what are the expectations of the school experience?; 3) how is success defined?; and 4) are there differences between local and non-local perceptions? To answer these questions we interrogated data from 31 very remote school *Collegial Snapshots*. A range of local and non-local school stakeholders including students, teachers, parents and carers were consulted.

We found that while jobs and careers were most often commented on, about two-thirds of the responses related to other imagined futures, which included further study, staying in or leaving the community and cultural or community roles. Less than three per cent of all comments in the data related to a future orientation. The main issues raised about the school experience were about academic outcomes, fun or enjoyment; choice and options; and learning language. The factors contributing to success were variously defined but the most frequent comments covered issues of behaviour, attendance, culture, language as well as health and well-being.

There were several significant differences between what locals commented on and what non-locals discussed. For example, under future orientation, ‘jobs or careers’ and ‘moving to another community’ were raised more often by locals than non-locals. Under expectations of the school experience, non-locals commented more on academic outcomes and choices or options than locals but locals raised issues about fun or enjoyment or language more often. In terms of success, issues related to behaviour, culture and language were raised more often by locals than non-locals while non-locals talked more about attendance and well-being.

Several implications arise from these findings. The differences in the nature of responses from locals and non-locals suggests that non-local teachers and leaders need to be mindful about their own ontological, epistemological and axiological positions when they consider aspiration and success in very remote schools. We see an important role for local educators in translating the codes of power from the school to the community and vice versa. For non-locals, the importance of listening to and working with the community and families so they can show the way forward for young people is paramount. This is perhaps the best way for educators to build aspiration among students. Finally, we have noted that currently the focus of schools in remote communities is on ‘getting kids to school’ in order to improve academic outcomes. We see the need for a deeper discussion that takes the larger purposes of schooling into account and considers the varied perceptions of the experience of school.

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