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Red Dirt Thinking on Aspiration and Success

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This article sets the scene for the series of five articles on 'red dirt thinking'. It first introduces the idea behind red dirt thinking as opposed to 'blue sky thinking'. Both accept that there are any number of creative and expansive solutions and possibilities to identified challenges — in this case, the challenge of improving education in very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island schools. However, the authors believe that creative thinking needs to be grounded in the reality of the local community context in order to be relevant. This article draws on emerging data from the Remote Education Systems project (a project within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation — CRC-REP) and highlights further questions and challenges we wish to address across the life of the project. It is part of a collection of papers presented on the theme 'Red Dirt Thinking'. The red dirt of remote Australia is where thinking for the CRC-REP's Remote Education Systems research project emerged. This article will examine the various public positions that exist in regard to the aspirations of young remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and consider the wider views that are held in terms of what constitutes educational 'success'. We explore the models of thinking and assumptions that underpin this public dialogue and contrast these ideas to the ideas that are being shared by remote Aboriginal educators and local community members through the work of the Remote Education Systems project. We will consider the implications and relevance of the aspiration and success debate for the remote Australian context and propose approaches and key questions for improved practice and innovation in relation to delivering a more 'successful' education for remote students. The authors begin by posing the simple question: How would, and can remote educators build aspiration and success? The wisdom of several commentators on remote education in Australia is presented in terms of a set of simple solutions to a straightforward problem. The assumptions behind these simple solutions are often unstated, and part of this article's role is to highlight the assumptions that common arguments for solutions are premised on. Further to the above question, we will also consider the question: In remote communities where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students live and learn, how is success defined? Is there language that corresponds to the western philosophical meanings of success? Having considered some possible alternatives, based on the early findings of the Remote Education Systems project research, the authors then pose the question: How would educators teach for these alternative measures of success? The answers to these questions are still forthcoming. However, as the research process reveals further insights in relation to these questions, it may be possible for all those involved in remote education to approach the 'problem' of remote education using a different lens. The lens may be smeared with red dirt, but it will enable people involved in the system to develop creative solutions in a challenging and rich environment.

■ **Keywords:** aspiration, success, remote Indigenous education, remote training and employment

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

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A key concern for the Remote Education Systems project is how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations, needs and aspirations. We hope to identify models and strategies that can improve learning outcomes for students, to increase opportunities for engagement in meaningful livelihoods beyond school. A key focus of the project is to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints in the research in order to inform actions and recommendations for systemic change. The work is also guided by an advisory group comprising Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics, educators and Aboriginal community organisation leaders.

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

This article will examine the various public positions that exist in relation to the aspirations of young remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and consider the wider views that are held in terms of what constitutes educational 'success'. We explore the models of thinking and assumptions that underpin this public dialogue and contrast these with the ideas that are being shared by remote Aboriginal educators and local community members through the work of the Remote Education Systems project. We will consider the implications and relevance of the aspiration and success debate for the remote Australian context and propose approaches and key questions for improved practice and innovation in relation to delivering a more 'successful' education for remote students. The paper draws on emerging data from the Remote Education Systems project (within the CRC-REP) and highlights further questions and challenges we wish to address across the life of the project. It is part of a collection of papers presented on the theme 'Red Dirt Thinking'.

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

Our Position

As non-Indigenous authors working in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community context, it is important both to seek to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in the dialogue and clarify our position as non-Indigenous.

Sam Osborne is a non-Indigenous educator who has worked in Aboriginal education since 1995 across urban and remote contexts in a range of roles, including primary and secondary teaching, Pitjantjatjara language teacher and Deputy Principal and Principal in Ernabella in the remote North West of South Australia. He has worked as a Central Australian consultant on the Principals Australia Institute's Dare to Lead project, as well as a range of roles in research and interpreting across remote communities in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. He has had a strong personal and professional connection with remote communities since 1989 and with his wife, raised their five children at Ernabella where his father in-law was born. They currently live in Alice Springs.

John Guenther is a non-Indigenous researcher who for the past 10 years, has worked in the Northern Territory, often in remote contexts. His professional experience has included work as an adult educator in vocational education and training (VET) and in higher education. He has managed research and evaluation projects in the fields of education and training, family services, justice, child protection and family violence.

Simplistic Solutions for a Complex Landscape

In preparing for this process, we gathered a collection of statements from public discussion about what a 'successful' remote education is, or how to achieve 'success'. At times this is couched in terms that simply describe 'the problem'. These include:

> *. . . the problem is the quality of the schools, particularly the curriculum and the teaching methods.* (Anderson, 2012, p. 4)

> *. . . there needs to be focused additional concrete efforts to make sure that kids attend school — and there the parents and communities do have a responsibility.* (Garrett, 2012)

> *This is the formula upon which our reform in Cape York is premised: Committed Teacher + Effective Instruction = Quality Teaching.* (Pearson, 2011, p. 53)

> *Put simply, quality teachers create quality outcomes.* (Sarra, 2011, p. 161)

> *It's employment that allows Indigenous people to walk amongst the giants of their traditional cultures and also to have economic independence which brings self-reliance, freedom and pride.* (Cullen, 2013)

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> *Curtisha has completed preschool — she knows how to hold a pencil, listen to the teacher, and adapt to the formal routines of the day. She's ready for school. Ready for the future. The mistakes made in one generation are being repaired in the next. The gap is being closed.* (Gillard, 2013)

> *School failure is the problem.* (Hughes & Hughes, 2012, p. 1)

From this small but diverse sample of views and simple formulas for success, analyses of the 'problem' and simple answers to achieving success in remote education, this much is clear: remote education is complex, it is contested and the debate engenders broad and passionate participation. All of these comments, however, assume that the goals of education and the values that underpin a sense of aspiration among remote Indigenous communities mirror those of the neoliberal values that inform the education system and society more broadly. As we will discuss further, a significant point of difference exists between remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities and the wider mainstream imagination in a range of important areas that inform the assumptions underpinning the comments above. Some examples include the deep value of learning in the remote Indigenous context as opposed to the well-documented lack of engagement with formal schooling and education more broadly (see Osborne, 2012). Other significant tensions remain unquestioned, such as the tendency for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members to engage in a range of training and employment opportunities, but not in the sense that these are the key stepping stones to a successful career in a particular field. The comments also tend to assume that formal (western) education and employment are the pinnacle of aspiration, and indeed the measure of success. This assumption is strongly challenged, however, in results from a survey of five Yolngu (Arnhem Land) communities:

> *Children need to be competent in both western and Yolngu teachings. Yolngu culture is paramount and western education must be embedded in a learning context that respects and affirms traditional Yolngu cultural knowledge, traditions and practices.* (Wearne & Yunupingu, 2011, p. 5)

According to Heifetz and Linsky (2002), one of the dangers of leading in complex and contested spaces is to apply 'technical (simplistic and formulaic) solutions' in the face of 'adaptive' (highly complex and long-term) challenges: 'When people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, at best they get short-term order at the expense of long-term progress' (p. 8).

One of the first priorities in leading in the remote education field would seem to be to understand that simplistic (and indeed, fatalistic) assertions need to be resisted in order to respond to the needs of local communities in such a way that enables formal education to be a means for building hope and aspiration (see Appadurai, 2004; Leadbeater, 2012), rather than further exacerbating and galvanising a sense of failure and disadvantage.

Defining Aspiration and Success In and Out of Remote Contexts

The Oxford Dictionary defines aspiration as 'a hope or ambition of achieving something' (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). In western contexts, questions such as 'What's your dream for the future?' or 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' underscore the embedded nature of both aspiration and 'achieving success' in the psyche of the neoliberal dominant culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics such as Nakata (2007), Arbon (2008) and Ford (2010) remind us that in remote community contexts, local people retain epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies and cosmologies that differ vastly from the western neoliberal norms that inform mainstream education and the broader community. Regardless of the remoteness, it is probably true that parents, carers and communities everywhere 'are powerful inculcators of values and aspirations' (Masters, 2013, p. 4). And while, as Masters (p. 4) suggests, teachers can also have a role in developing belief in students, those axiologies, ontologies and cosmologies that are embedded in families are a strong foundation for educational aspiration. Moll et al. (1992) describe the potential of drawing from a student's 'funds of knowledge' where: 'the emphasis is not solely on remediating students' English language limitations, but on utilising available resources, including the children's or the parents' language and knowledge, in creating new, advanced instructional circumstances for the students' academic development' (p. 23).

The funds of knowledge terminology (see Moll et al., 1992) can be a useful entry point for considering the presence of knowledge, skills, values and aspiration, rather than focusing on their apparent absence where educators and systems tend to: '. . . assume they come from socially and intellectually limiting family environments, or that these students lack ability, or there is something wrong with their thinking or their values, especially in comparison with wealthier peers' (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986, as cited in Moll et al., 1992, p. 20).

Acknowledging and incorporating a student's funds of knowledge provides a platform to support Nakata's (2007), Arbon's (2008) and Fords' (2010) statements on the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies being both acknowledged and present in the education experience for Indigenous students.

Success in educational literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schooling is defined variously in terms of academic performance, student retention, graduation, attendance and qualification (e.g., Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Often the definitions are tacit — as if everyone knows what success is — so that the reader must make

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sense of the meaning by the context (see, e.g., Andersen, 2011; Craven, 2012). Sometimes the term is used in conjunction with 'closing an achievement gap' or removing disadvantage (e.g., O'Keefe, Olney, & Angus, 2012).

In the literature on the philosophy of education, success is viewed more broadly in terms of achievement of the broad aims of education: its epistemic aims, such as building knowledge, truth and skills (Robertson, 2009); its moral and political aims (Brighouse, 2009), its individual capacity and capability development aims (Pring, 2010); as well as its intrinsic value as an end in itself (Marples, 2010). Seen in this light, a 'good' education will provide hope (Leadbeater, 2012), self-efficacy, and personal agency as well as social justice and equity (OECD, 2012).

While the above summarises, from academic perspectives, how aspiration and success might be described, questions remain about the kind of language that might be used by people in remote communities to explain what they aspire to 'be'. It may be helpful then to consider the contrast between the possible basis of identity for non-Indigenous people and those whose home and country is described as 'remote communities'. This insight can further highlight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being and knowing within country that privileges their epistemologies.

One of these essential differences is highlighted in the way you might describe 'who' you are. For example, the western norm is to offer your name and your occupation by way of introduction, but in remote Aboriginal society, your occupation does not define 'who' you are. You are born into a social position and/or have social and cultural connections to people and country (places) that define you. For example, I might introduce myself by saying, 'Hi, I'm Bill and I'm a teacher'. In the remote contexts of Australia, a more likely introduction to 'who I am and where I fit' might sound like: 'Hi, I'm Terry and I'm from ... community', or 'my family is from ...'. If there is a possible common acquaintance, this will be quickly established to determine how we might be related, or relate to each other. This will mean an introduction may not include a name, but rather establish a social relationship in order to 'place' each other. In offering a relationship term to a common relation or acquaintance, the most important aspects of 'who we are' are established and the question of 'how we relate' is also established. These representations of identity, determined as they are through relationships and place, are not alien to non-Indigenous cultures of Australia. However, the primacy of individual and corporate identities as they are constructed in remote communities tend to be at odds with the rational understanding of what it means to 'be' as a non-Indigenous outsider (Moshman, 2009). The enculturated identity will generally prevail over attempts to impose identities based on acculturated values of work and qualifications. The idea of 'resistance' (Beresford, Partington, & Gower, 2012) does not properly explain the apparent non-conformance to mainstream values. Identity then, in the context of conflicting races and cultures, is a complex product that reflects the 'complementarity of life history and history' (Erikson, 1968, p. 314). It is, to a large extent determined by 'cultural membership' (Lee, 2010, p. 283), rather than by external influences.

Reinforcing and building identity is a critical element to a successful education for any student (Masters, 2013). Educators need to consider how education might build and reinforce the identity of their students. This is a challenge in the very remote community context (indeed in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts) where the deepest underpinning foundations that form identity are not derived from a shared understanding or values system (Kickett-Tucker & Coffin, 2011; Sarra, 2011) and as a result, the language and assumptions of neoliberal understandings of aspiration and success can make no sense at all to members of the community and students in the classroom. A simplistic educational response to this conundrum is commonly taken where educators and, more broadly, the systems they work in, redistribute the values that underpin their own experiences, holding these values and assumptions up as the 'obvious' goal of student aspiration. This is expressed over and over in a linear teacher-directed narrative in remote classrooms: 'If you come to school every day you will learn to read and write and then you will finish school and then you can maybe go to TAFE (accredited training) or even university, and then you'll be able to get a good job and earn money and look after your family.'

Despite our collective obsession with this narrative, it remains problematic when left un-critiqued, even where students and their families generally adhere to the logic that informs the narrative. For the remote Indigenous community context, this well-worn path demands examination, and we intend to address this issue further in this article.

When working with a team of Yuendumu community researchers in 2011 (a Warlpiri language community around 300kms north west of Alice Springs in the Tanami Desert), we laid out some of the essential differences between western (*kardiya*) and Yapa (*Warlpiri*) values as a process of identifying values that come into conflict in classrooms where kardiya teachers tend to (subconsciously, or implicitly, see also Delpit, 1993) reproduce western values and social norms, causing an epistemological and ontological conflict for Yapa students. The researchers identified a range of concepts where western educators and Yapa students have vastly differing understandings of key terms. The researchers recorded their thinking on a wall. 'You (kardiya) value respect' they said, 'but you respect property, authority and achievement. When we say we value respect, we mean we respect relationship, country, jukurrpa (story/dreaming/law) and knowledge.' Remote educators need to appreciate the demands they place on students in promoting 'aspirational'

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language, understanding that at some points in the narrative, (even unknowingly) they are essentially asking students to let go of one system of values in order to adopt a foreign system of conflicting values. It is far more complex than 'success' or 'failure'.

Verran (2005) suggests that Indigenous and western knowledges are, at times, 'irreconcilable'. This apparent conflict of values and epistemology tends to result in passive resistance among students where they might attend school, but do not fully 'open themselves' (see Tjitayi & Osborne, 2013) to embrace the learning or adopt more active forms of resistance such as 'voting with their feet' (choosing not to attend). Munns and McFadden (2000) explain that more visible aspects of Aboriginal student resistance to education emerge in the upper primary and secondary years (such as dropping out, intermittent attendance and disengagement; see also Smyth & Hattam, 2004), but that resistance is well established in more subtle, less visible forms from the very early years of schooling.

Understanding Success In and Out of Remote Contexts

In recent years, Australia has seen an increase in the political will to see education as a homogenous and federated commodity. Data that is used for wide comparison has always been that of attendance; student retention, with variations across school sites for measuring; and reporting on literacy and numeracy progress according to the programs and the priorities of each school site. The introduction in 2008 of a nationally uniform and population-wide testing program for literacy and numeracy skills, referred to commonly as NAPLAN (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2011), was followed by the introduction of the My School website (ACARA, 2013) where results from these tests are published and compared in small groups of 'like' schools for comparison, meaning that for the first time, anyone could look up a school and compare how 'successful' the students were in comparison to other schools around Australia. Following that, the introduction of the Australian Curriculum has seen a further homogenisation of what knowledge is considered essential for all students in Australian schools to acquire (ACARA, 2012). At the same time there has been a national standardisation of teacher professional standards (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011).

Politically, the logic for an education system that allowed the comparison of 'apples with apples' was argued and defended when criticism of this approach emerged from schools, educators, the AEU (Australian Education Union) and academics alike (Gavrielatos & Hopgood, 2010). With the introduction of a nationally uniform system of measuring success, the galvanisation of remote schools and, in particular, the perception of education in the Northern Territory as 'failing', 'behind', and 'not a real education' has occurred (see, e.g., Anderson, 2012). Coupled to this, the lack of space in the political and public dialogue in regard to strengths-based, placesbased and 'other' ways of being and knowing has been noticeable. The media focus has hardened on measures of attendance and NAPLAN scores, and remote education has been judged harshly (see, e.g., Schliebs, 2011), sparking a myriad of calls for remote students to attend urban boarding schools to 'escape' the apparent failure and hopeless desperation of their home communities. Aboriginal academic Professor Marcia Langton, for example, states: '. . . the conditions are there for them [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students] to perform much better than the children who don't attend boarding schools. It's a tragedy to have to say that, it's heartbreaking, but those are the facts' (ABC, 2013).

Andrew Penfold, founder and Chief Executive of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, calls for extra investment in his own company to achieve education equality:

> *Lifting our funding base by an additional $100 million would help AIEF educate 7,000 indigenous students. This type of investment would be revolutionary and transformational and give us a real possibility of helping to Close the Gap on Indigenous education inequality . . . (Penfold, 2013)*

This type of statement from a non-Indigenous executive calling for massive investment into his own company demands further critique, but the intention here is simply to highlight some recent calls for remote Indigenous student participation in boarding schools to increase.

These calls tend to gloss over the long established 'failure' of programs such as those offered by elite private boarding schools where retention rates remain low as many students leave for a range of reasons, including homesickness, their ill-preparedness to survive the cultural context of the urban school, and the lack of these schools' capacity to handle the complex and demanding space of brokering the worlds of remote young people and the social and academic challenges that face them in an urban context. Within the literature it is difficult to find a critique of boarding schools in terms of their results, retention of remote students, or their effectiveness for remote communities.

In order to increase the rates of 'success' of these metrocentric education programs, a range of government and privately funded programs have emerged, with the language of aspiration, success and leadership embedded in their mandate and program titles. *Follow the Dream,* for example, provides regional and urban focus centres for remote students to attend, describing the purpose of their program as:

> *. . . a program designed to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students in secondary schools in Western Australia. The fundamentals of the strategy are the selection of students*

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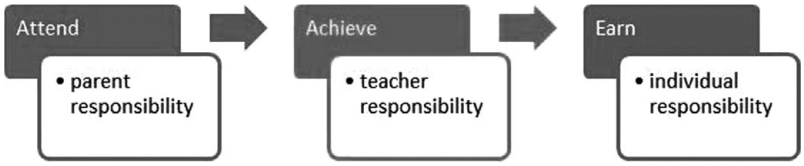


FIGURE 1
A linear model for the achievement of successful outcomes.

> *who are considered to have the academic ability, skills and aspirations to be successful. (Partington et al., 2009, p. 1)*

Other such programs include: *IYLP* (Indigenous Youth Leadership Program), *Bound for Success*, the *Yalari Foundation*. From the remote perspective, it is important to understand that while these programs can be a wonderful and important opportunity for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, there is again very little objective critique of these programs in terms of the extent of their uptake among very remote students, or their apparent success. One of the problems with evaluations of any of these programs is that they tend to base their findings and conclusions on the summative outcomes that fail to include the views of, or results for, those who have dropped out. Taking into account the lack of evidence, it seems ill-conceived, even simplistic, to suggest that 'the answer' to the 'problem' of remote education is to simply send very remote students away to boarding schools. These opportunities are important, but need to be understood as a very small part of an overall picture. There is a pressing need to explore the notions of a 'successful' education for the 'other' very remote students; that is, the 99%, and we will explore this in subsequent sections of this article. This is not an unfamiliar dilemma as Morris (2009, as cited in Fabricant & Fine, 2012) points out in the dialogue about the education and success of African American students:

> *In the end, the educational advancement of African American people cannot be solely measured by the extent to which some African American children are able to have a middle class home and schooling experience — almost in a 'talented tenth' sense with the notion that they will reach back and help those at the bottom. Instead, it can be best measured by the extent to which* African American children at the bottom *are provided the social and educational means to elevate themselves [emphasis added] (p. 106)*

We are not suggesting that the 'talented tenth' are to be discounted or denied opportunities to participate and 'succeed' in mainstream educational terms and contexts, but to allow the measure of educational success for very remote students to stand on the shoulders of the few students who pursue mainstream educational experiences denies both the value of the majority who remain in their home communities and relieves systems and educators of the mandate to provide a quality place-based education in the nearly 300 very remote schools where community-held values are least congruent with the western values that inform the education system nationally.

In the broader Australian schooling system, it would appear that a simple logic for 'success' underpins the focus of responsibility for successful outcomes. In simple terms, parents need to get their children to school, teachers need to get the students to learn, and young people emerging from the education conveyor belt need to get themselves a job. This simple model is in Figure 1.

The assumptions that underpin this simplistic model may well mirror the path for success in some contexts, but unchallenged, the model assumes a homogenous set of values, life experiences and cultural domains, and the view that aspiration is a commonly held and understood concept. The simplicity of the model is mirrored in the language associated with fixing the problem, that is, removing the 'obstacles to success' (O'Keefe et al., 2012), finding 'what works' (What Works: The Work Program, 2012) or finding 'pathways to success' (ACER, 2011). What that success looks like is often tacitly assumed to be the same as success in the mainstream, without any critique (see, e.g., Gray & Beresford, 2008). Academics and bureaucrats alike fall into the trap of assuming that because something works in the mainstream it will work equally well in remote contexts — for example, in assuming a causal link between attendance and academic outcomes (e.g., Jorgensen, 2012), despite the evidence to the contrary (Guenther, 2012) or the absence of evidence — in which case, circular arguments of false claims are sometimes brought to bear to make a point (Hunter & Stephenson, 2013).

The Language of Aspiration and Success

Language is the verbalisation of the most sensitive and deeply nuanced elements of a collective understanding of the world, providing a platform for shared meaning-making and expression of internalised values. In working with Anangu (Pitjantjatjara) educators in recent discussions about aspiration and success, it is interesting to note that the Pitjantjatjara language does not have any words that resemble 'aspiration' or 'success', and more broadly, offers no conceptual supports to explain these complex concepts. An absence of language in this respect indicates a collective non-engagement with these concepts and values in the context that is so confidently promulgated by politicians, academics and educators alike. The same is to be said

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of the concept of leadership, with the word 'mayatja' being an adoption of the English word 'major' to indicate a sense of being an authority, or 'boss' (see Goddard, 1996). The concept of 'Anangu pulka'(a senior, authoritative figure) may be a closely linked idea to that of a 'leader', but this implies seniority through knowledge, experience and authority to speak on behalf of the collective or country (a place). This is similar to the English language concept of 'elder', but is problematic in its application to concepts such as 'youth leadership', for example. This raises questions as to the national 'conversation' about the aspiration and educational success of remote students. If there is a limited (or no) linguistic or conceptual framework for the language of 'aspiration' or 'success' in the terms that western society accepts as an axiomatic and shared set of values, it seems imperative that a conversation, rather than a monologue should begin. This would require educators and governments to hold more loosely to their axiomatic preconceptions of aspiration and success for remote young people in order to reposition their collective endeavours from an informed standpoint. If nothing else, the assumptions that inspire programs listed earlier (*Bound for Success, Follow the Dream, IYLP* and so on) need to be re-examined and reinterpreted for the very remote contexts in order to establish a shared platform from which remote young people can genuinely invest themselves and build a meaningful sense of aspiration.

Pictures of Success in Remote Contexts

If, as we suggest here, the current approaches and dialogue in relation to aspiration and educational success for remote young people are simplistic and largely ineffective, this begs the obvious question, 'What would educational success look like in remote contexts?'

We have argued that the concept of remote Aboriginal students going to boarding schools and being 'successful' in the mainstream context is an important opportunity, but realistically it is only going to be suitable for a very small percentage of the population. If success in broader terms means the achievement and attainment of power and control, independence, choice and a sense of long-term security, what would this look like in a context where achieving these ends through an economic and consumerist paradigm is not only unrealistic, but unavailable? Advocates for the economic definition of success often advocate 'getting a job in the mines' as the only avenue for 'success' for remote people (see, e.g., Aikman, 2012), and yet remote communities commonly do not engage in employment at mines or resorts, even if they are in closer vicinity to the community than metropolitan alternatives to economic opportunity. In Central Australia, the Granites gold mine and Ayer's Rock Resort are examples of touted 'answers' to providing economic opportunities for local communities, but both remain largely ignored and avoided in terms of engaging with employment opportunities. Other examples which, to varying degrees, mirror this situation are found at other mines (uranium at Jabiru, bauxite at Gove and Weipa, manganese ore on Groote Eylandt, iron ore in the Pilbara). The reality is that mining tends to favour fly-in fly-out workers, and education and training opportunities in remote communities are not directly connected to these employment options (Guenther & Boyle, 2013), despite the best intentions of Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) and Indigenous employment strategies (Holcombe, 2009; Langton, Mazel, Palmer, Shain, & Tehan, 2006).

In 2012 and 2013, young people from the Mutitjulu, Docker River and Imanpa communities (the Ayer's Rock Resort's 'local' communities in the Southern region of the Northern Territory) were interviewed about schooling experiences and their thoughts about the future. Despite national rhetoric about the Ayer's Rock Resort being an opportunity for Indigenous employment and training (see *Alice Springs News*, 2011; Indigenous Land Corporation, 2013; Karvelis, 2012) no students in the 2012 or 2013 surveys even mentioned the resort as an avenue for potential training or employment interest for the future. Instead, their aspiration and hope for the future remains firmly place based, citing a range of community-based employment and activity options as their preferred option for the future (see Ninti One, 2012, 2013).

And so, it seems that few very remote students 'succeed' in metropolitan boarding school contexts, and very few students imagine themselves taking up jobs in regional opportunities such as mining or mainstream tourism operations — indeed, it is very difficult to find any evidence one way or another which shows how well boarding schools compare, in terms of academic performance, for students from remote communities. However, the Nyangatjatjara College surveys (Ninti One, 2013) clearly show that young people are hopeful and determined about engaging positively in their family and local community, whether it be through formal employment, (teacher, clinic, office, ranger and so on) or other concepts of 'work', such as working in the community or working 'with family'. This may imply a whole range of activities and responsibilities that lie outside of the broader understanding of formal employment as 'work'. Education, with its focus on transitioning students into 'learning or earning', that is, further training, education or employment, needs to be responsive to the chasm in expectations, values and motivations for engaging in education. The process in bridging this chasm is highly developmental, requires long-term commitments and demands community-wide engagement and innovation, well beyond many of the processes proposed in the current policy and political climate, where large sums of money are allocated to nationalise specific 'successful' programs. In the spirit of 'red dirt thinking', that is, pragmatic and contextual starting points to addressing these adaptive challenges, it could be worthwhile developing a focus on community-based education that highlights the

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economic imperatives and globalised values that drive industries such as mining and tourism to commence large-scale economic activity in the region of the remote communities where students live. At the same time, students need an entry point with personal relevance and connection to these spaces, while presenting opportunities to build the self-disciplines that are necessary to succeed in the global employment context.

Aboriginal communities have long demonstrated an attraction to the deeply symbolic and meaningful, while rejecting the (apparently) menial, low order demands that western society places on its adherents. Resisting technical 'solutions' to the employment challenge (more training, Indigenous employment imperatives on industry and so on), perhaps an adaptive approach would include engaging students in their own histories, pre and post colonisation, and reconnecting the intergenerational layers within the community with the responsibilities of 'caring for country' in a completely changed global context, where the concept of 'caring' moves beyond ecological and spiritual responsibilities and embraces the legal, economic and political aspects of land and the economic opportunities that arise from industry 'on country'. This requires an ongoing commitment to acquiring the operational aspects of education, such as literacy and numeracy, but requires students to engage in global and yet contextually meaningful higher order thinking, moving remote education from a system that redistributes disadvantage to one that empowers and builds hope (see Appadurai, 2004; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006; Leadbeater, 2012).

This approach moves the logic for education from one that says: 'If you leave and go away from your family, adopting a completely foreign set of values for long enough, you (as an individual and a "success") can come back (if you want to) and help your family (who, it is assumed will be equally destitute and disadvantaged in 20 years' time)', to a logic that demands a collective commitment to education for a purpose that is bigger than the individual and allows a meaningful answer to the question of: 'What is a remote education for?' In the context of Anangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara) communities, an adaptive 'red dirt thinking' approach widens the horizon of 'aspiration' from the menial, such as folding beds at the Ayer's Rock Resort, to applying contextual and educational experiences in and out of the community, such as board level engagement, connecting with country and traditional knowledges, building community-based opportunities for economic benefit, and directing the organisations that work in the region through informed vision casting and an increased sense of being part of the economic system rather than a hindrance to it. Learning how to read and write is of importance, but learning how to think and see a bigger picture is essential if remote students are to 'succeed'.

Yami Lester (1993) describes his experiences as a blind, 'educational failure' in fighting for (and achieving) land rights for the APY (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara) lands in 1981 and the Uluru Kata Tjuta handback in 1985. He was strongly involved in the foundation of IAD (the Institute for Aboriginal Development) in Alice Springs, the foundation of Mimili community and a range of other business and high level political moves. None of these 'achievements' (read: 'successes') required a formal education (Yami didn't attend school as a child), or indeed, literal vision, but were borne out of an ability to broker the two worlds of apparent ontological and epistemological impasse and, seeing a way through, take bold steps forward, bringing the rest of the mob with him.

Red dirt thinking on remote education asks: How can we improve the formal schooling 'outputs' that students like Yami failed to attain, but retain and amplify the strength, identity, confidence and character (funds of knowledge) that Yami acquired to achieve 'success'? It seems the pendulum has swung to a point that what gains we have made in educational outputs (literacy, numeracy, attendance and so on) remain roundly criticised as failure, and yet we have pursued these 'successes' to the detriment of the things that have been great strengths in previous generations in remote communities.

Issues from Non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives

If education is to move beyond its obsession with the externally derived data and data-based deficit discourse that seems to be choking the space for imagination, creativity, long-term adaptive approaches and risk-taking that is required to respond to the complex nature of the field, then it stands to reason that educators and education systems will need to better understand the power of this tool called 'education' when applied outside the limited constructs of a homogenised, westernised and urban-centric construct of what a 'real' education is. If remote educators and the systems they work in do not challenge themselves to take account of the remote contexts they work in and the values that inform them, they are in danger of perpetually applying and reapplying the simplistic (and failing) logic of schooling and education as presented earlier in Figure 1.

Unchallenged, remote non-Indigenous educators will continue to assume that their own values and understanding of what aspiration is, are shared and repeat the linear monologue of the path to success, as discussed earlier (see also Delpit, 1993). They may also assume that in the apparent absence of any evidence of an aspirational or successful environment, it is up to them to 'give the students a dream', remaining ignorant of the existing funds of knowledge that are a critical foundation for imagining and aspiring. This is, of course a false and dangerous logic and ultimately leads to wearing away any sense of intergenerational cohesion and capacity that exists for inspiration as well as aspiration. Granted, there are times in community and family life when this is hard to see, but the red dirt

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thinking, adaptive approach we are encouraging here will require educators and students alike to be able to be and work across cultural spaces, to step outside the limitations of one's own lived experience and accept that other ways to envisage success and creative and new approaches, yet to be imagined, are required to begin to respond to student needs for the future.

Burton and Osborne (in press) explain that teachers need to understand that Anangu students do not view the future through the lens of the Piranpa (white) teacher, but that the future is handed to them by their family. Katrina Tjitayi (Tjitayi & Osborne, 2013) describes the critical role of the constant and 'close' voices of supportive family members in building identity and confidence to be 'open spirited' in embracing new knowledge. Makinti Minutjukur (Minutjukur & Osborne, in press) outlines the blueprint for how she sees aspiration and success for Anangu young people:

> *I push young people to embrace teaching and learning and one day we want to see them finally arrive into an excellent job, but they will take our knowledge, culture and language with them and we will support them. (p. 11)*

For Anangu, aspiring and succeeding remains part of the collectivist ontology, and living within this enduring values system means that pursuing a values system and ontology that focuses on individual needs and demands, individual aspiration and success has a cost attached that is not easily understood by Piranpa educators who understand the individualist ontology as 'normal'. But as Makinti describes, very few remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are going to completely reject the western, individualised world and actively engage with this world, even subjugate it, incorporating it into their own experiences and values systems and lives (see Jones, 2007; Nakata, 2007).

And so the red dirt challenge is laid out; educators and the systems they work in need to understand aspiration and success as a collective process and achievement. It is a journey where the way is not yet marked, a uniquely individual process for each community context and era (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012). Educators need to be able to shift from authoritative provider, to broker and enabler of complex, adaptive and long-term change and community development. They need to see the possibility of a new mark and measure of 'success' and enable a collective aspiration to continue to grow in the more productive phases of community life, while remaining resilient and hopeful when things come to a grinding halt, seeing that remote community life is more cyclical than urban contexts; and to remain prepared for the moment that collective momentum provides the next opportunity for advancing the collective on the journey of aspiring and succeeding.

Conclusions

While it is one thing to challenge the conceptual nature of aspiration and success, whether they are formulated in urban or remote communities, it is another thing to propose how imagined futures and collective or individual senses of what constitutes meaningful achievement, might be built. It is one thing to promote high expectations as an underpinning foundation for teaching practice but it is another to translate or impute a teacher's understanding of expectations into a different cultural context which does not share the language, history, models or expectations of the educational values, outcomes, beliefs or identities that many non-Indigenous educators take for granted. Early findings from the CRC-REP's Remote Education Systems project suggest that a language of success and aspiration can be elicited in remote contexts, though the descriptors and indicators differ markedly from the predominant (mostly tacit) markers of what it means to achieve, strive and become successful in other contexts where western values dominate.

Further work in the Remote Education Systems project will focus on building from remote community language and perspectives about 'successful' remote education and proposing 'Red Dirt' curriculum and alternative education models that can take account of the nature of community demands, values and social norms.

While we have discussed the remote education systems' and non-Indigenous educators' roles in supporting contextually relevant views of success and aspiration, how or indeed whether the system or educator should inculcate students with ambition is a question we are yet to answer. For educators who have been enculturated, immersed and trained in educational environments where there is a high congruence between the histories, purposes, values and norms of school and those of the surrounding community, the reality is that many remote communities are quite different. School is in effect an island of norms and values where the talk of high expectations and achievement is as foreign a concept as the prevailing languages are foreign. We therefore encourage all educators and the systems they work in, whether Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous, to tread and think carefully before rolling out programs and quick fix solutions that are designed to build success. This is not to suggest that those from remote communities should not yearn for something better — of course they should and will. What that something better is though, will undoubtedly have a different trajectory and potentially a different endpoint than many of us may expect.

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