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Introduction

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This Special Issue of the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* presents a unique collection of nine articles representing the initial outputs from the Remote Education Systems' (RES) 5-year project to research and identify ways in which education systems might respond more effectively to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expectations, aspirations and learning needs. The project is unique for two reasons: (1) its focus on one of the most critical and complex aspects of the Australian education landscape — the need for systemic change in improving the education outcomes of Indigenous students living in remote locations throughout the nation; and (2) there is sufficient *time* for researchers to meaningfully engage with the diversity of remote-based stakeholders — educators, parents, students and the wider community – in order to obtain their viewpoints concerning the value of the remote-based education service delivery provided in their schools.

While much has been written about Indigenous education access, participation, retention and achievement over recent decades, the dominant tone of such writing has tended to reflect a discourse of failure. More recently, however, there has been some shift in the discourse, something akin to a growing recognition that education may not have delivered on its promise to all Australians. What might be perceived as emerging evidence of attitudinal change, especially in community service sectors, including education, may be due to the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) implementation and continuing focus on the 'Closing the Gap' initiatives and accompanying targets, following the 2006 launch of the Close the Gap Campaign. Within this context, the articles in this collection will provide informative and interesting insights into the realities of living and learning in remote Australia while simultaneously challenging the centre-periphery thinking that has determined accepted ways of knowing and being in this country.

The first four articles in the collection provide an introduction to the theoretical thinking that has resulted in 'red dirt thinking' being identified as the inspirational central theme that is subsequently used to reflect its relevance within specific educational contexts. Hence, these articles explore the concept of 'red dirt thinking' through the following theoretical frameworks: (1) aspiration and success; (2) educational disadvantage; (3) power, pedagogy and paradigms; and (4) education — a people-based system.

Osborne and Guenther's article is inspirational in that it seeks to contextualise the notion of 'red dirt thinking' as a process of grounding their innovative ideas in the reality of the country in which they are undertaking their research, the country in which the education settings and communities in which they are collaborating, are similarly located. This 'grounding' is a critical and deliberate strategy to guard against any possibility of a surfeit of 'blue sky' thinking resulting in collaborations that have no hope of working because they are meaningless to the community whose feet are firmly planted in their own red dirt. Significantly, this research seeks to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints as the basis for driving systemic change and informing action. Their discussions around a range of issues to do with appreciating perceptual differences in terms of what constitutes aspiration and success in education within the collective context that is implicit in 'red dirt thinking', are not only informative and insightful but a source of inspiration and valuable reading for educators and bureaucrats.

The second theoretical article begins with a critique of notions of 'disadvantage' and 'advantage' as constructed in policy and reported in data collections. Guenther, Bat, and Osborne then pose a number of questions designed to shift the reader into a 'red dirt thinking' mode. This shift is intended to open readers' minds to some very different possibilities in terms of developing a new discourse of success in remote education. These challenging questions serve not only to uncover many of the assumptions that surround Indigenous education, but to

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also provide the impetus for the systemic change that will effect the change to a discourse of advantage rather than disadvantage.

Osborne and Guenther's second article moves to a discussion of 'red dirt thinking' in relation to power, pedagogy and paradigms. This article contains some valuable reflections around traditional centre-based dialogues of power and pedagogy and the challenges confronting educators who wish to engage at the cultural interface. The complexities associated with operating within the contested knowledge space that is the 'school' are highlighted in this article, thus revealing the breakdown of the 'binary' discourse and the need for teachers to position themselves in innovative communicative spaces that will enable them to effectively engage with their students and stakeholders in developing and delivering learning that is relevant to local needs and valued by local learners.

Bat and Guenther's article locates 'red dirt thinking' within a people-based system that is far removed from the reality of the contemporary school-based system and which is perceived as catering for the specific needs of accountability-focused mainstream schools. Essentially the focus of this article is to reveal, contrary to accepted assumptions, the enormous complexity that underlies the provision of remote-based learning that is not only relevant to students' needs but also perceived as 'being of value' by the students, their families and their communities. The many layers of cultural responsibility and protocol that impact upon relationships, both within and beyond the school itself, are incomprehensible to most outsiders, reflecting the radically different world views that impact upon the capacity of remote-based learners — teachers, students and community — to engage with one another in ways that contribute to a worthwhile educational experience for students. The discussion around systems — the way they work and their relevance in remote communities — is a valuable component of this article and is essential reading for all educators interested in finding 'new' ways to deliver effective education in remote Australia.

Clarke and Denton have produced a very useful model of collaboration which could be seen as essentially putting the theoretical considerations of the previous four articles into practice. Having identified the siloed approach to service-delivery in remote locations as a structural barrier to addressing issues around child wellbeing and learning, the authors outline a collaborative model designed to bring together interdisciplinary knowledge and practice within community settings. Their argument suggests that the use of such a collaborative approach would have value for the range of service providers operating in remote communities because it involves a process that has been found to work in Indigenous communities, and hence would deliver more effective and sustainable service delivery.

The following two articles, the first by Guenther & Bat and the second by Guenther, are valuable reading for educators seeking to work in remote-based educational settings. Both articles deliver challenging insights into critical issues that continue to impact upon Indigenous educational outcomes in this country. The first discusses societal perceptions concerning what is a 'good' education and the systemic assumptions that have been used to determine 'who' benefits from such education in Australia. Such assumptions are then aligned to inform the discussion around the discourse of failure in ways that reveal how the rhetoric of disadvantage has been used to shape the educational agenda in remote school settings and set up the rhetoric of remote schooling. This is the process for re-inforcing the discourse of failure. These articles are not only insightful but also make a critical contribution to the thinking of those interested in effecting positive change in their own practice.

In the final two articles, Osborne focuses on remote schooling contexts in Anangu schools in the north west of South Australia, southern Northern Territory and nearby regions of Western Australia. The focus of his first article is the challenges faced by remote educational leaders in delivering education within the context of Anangu perceptions about what constitutes learning. In discussing the implications of these binary positions for educators, Osborne reflects upon his own experiences as a non-Indigenous teacher and later Principal in this region. It is an interesting and reflective article, which provides challenging insights for educators delivering remote education services. In his other article he focuses on providing a comparative insight of a MindMatters journey when considered through Anangu eyes! A wonderful revealing article that provides a valuable final insight into the importance of effecting change in our way of thinking about and then actually delivering meaningful learning programs in remote schools.

About the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's Remote Education Systems project

The Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, Remote Education Systems project is a 5-year project designed to investigate how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations, aspirations and needs. It will identify strategies and models that will improve outcomes for students and their families. The project team, based in Alice Springs is working to engage with a wide range of remote education stakeholders, with a particular focus on the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. The articles in this Special Issue reflect much of the formative, foundational thinking and early analysis of data that is being collected.

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Professor Jeannie Herbert AM is Foundation Chair of Indigenous Studies at Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia. Following a long career as a teacher, guidance officer and educational administrator and manager, she has, during the past two decades in the university sector, established a reputation for strong leadership and innovative thinking in Indigenous Education. Professor Herbert was awarded an Australia Medal in the 2012 Queen's Birthday Honours for her work in education, particularly through improvements to educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Her PhD study examined Indigenous success in education especially in terms of clarifying Indigenous Australian perspectives of what constitutes educational success. Her current research focus is education/research as a tool of empowerment for Indigenous peoples.

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