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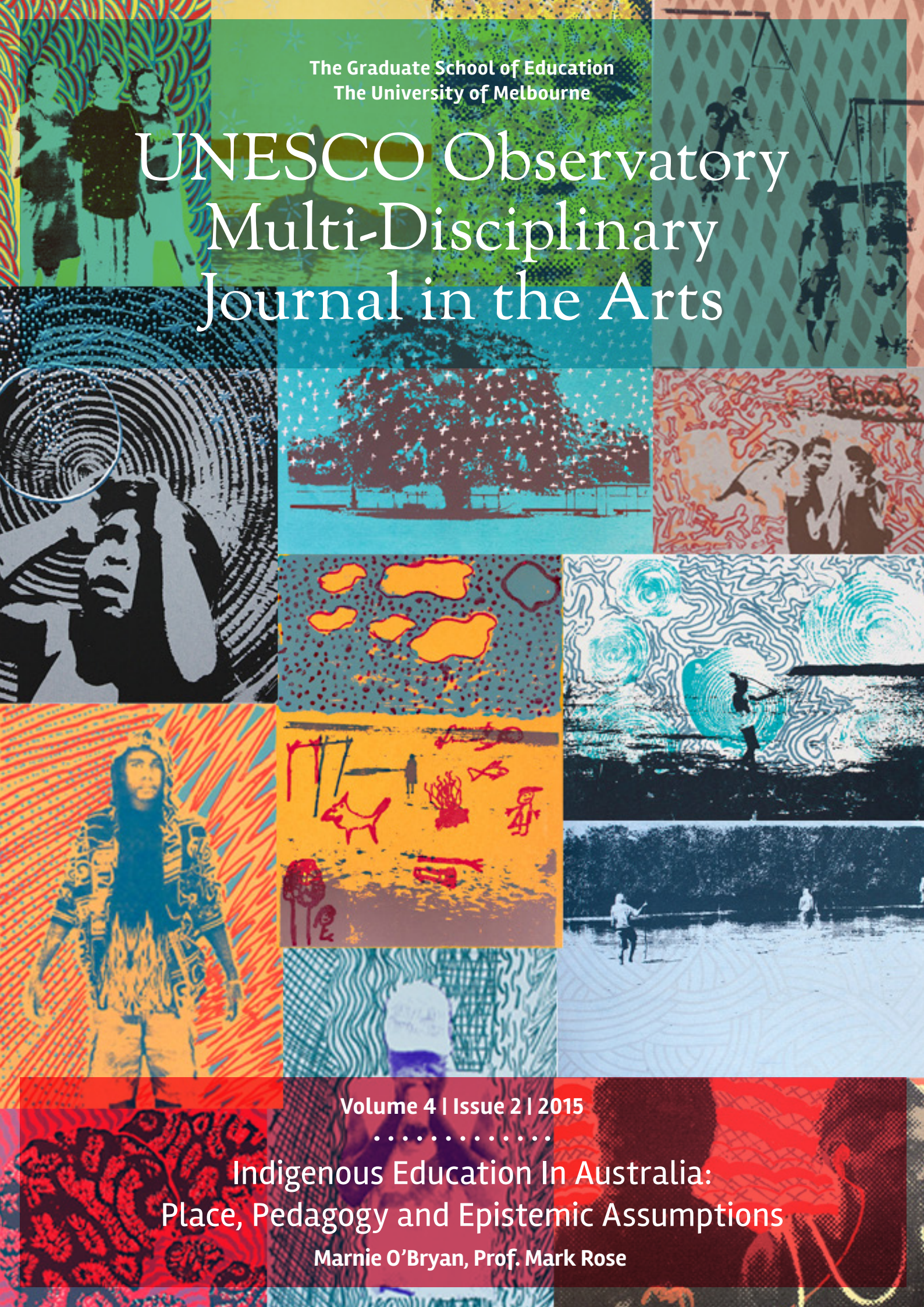

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Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions

Marnie O'Bryan, Prof. Mark Rose

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ABOUT THE E–JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions

Guest Editors
Marnie O'Bryan
Prof. Mark Rose

THEME

This special edition of the UNESCO Observatory E-Journal focuses on education for and about the First Peoples of Australia and bears witness to the many faces of Indigenous education in Australia. It testifies to a complex landscape; places on a map, places in minds and places in spirit that taken together present a snapshot of the tone and dimension of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in early 2015.

Indigenous education policy is framed by a bi-partisan commitment to 'closing the gap'. In some instances, Indigenous leaders are framing the debate over how this is best achieved. At the same time, non-Indigenous educators are increasingly becoming aware that equality and mutual respect can only be established once the Australian community opens its mind to the ancient wisdom and the true stories of this place. Many of the articles in this publication identify the 'gap' as an epistemological divide and argue that, like any bridge, education measures aimed at 'closing the gap' need to be constructed simultaneously from both sides. To that end, a number of papers focus on initiatives being developed and explored by mainstream schools to give authentic voice to the perspectives of First Australians for the benefit of non-Indigenous students.

COVER ART

Yirrkala Collage
Various Artists,
Yirrkala Art Centre

Courtesy of the artists and Yirrkala Art Centre

The papers in Volume One, '**Indigenous Education in Australia: Policy, Participation and Praxis**', are all concerned with how Western educational structures and institutions work for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Volume Two of the Journal is entitled '**Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions**'. Each of the articles in this volume pertains to the education experiences of people living in remote Australia.

The articles in this publication take the reader through a rich multidisciplinary tapestry that points to the breadth and complexity of the Indigenous education landscape in Australia today. The papers are honest and true to the heterogeneous communities that are the First Peoples of Australia. Similarly, the poetry and artworks that appear here bear witness to the breadth, depth and diversity of artistic talent and tradition in this country. Taken together, they challenge the reader to move beyond a simplistic quest for 'the silver bullet' to redress disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They encourage reflection, innovation, reciprocity, respect and empowerment through education.

We recommend each and every article.

Prof. Mark Rose & Marnie O'Bryan
Guest Editors

Accompanying Piece

Wanampi mankur mankurpa kutjara kutjara
Gordon Ingkatji

Courtesy of the Artist
and Ernabella Arts Inc.

Families as foundation: Aṉangu perspectives on what else matters in remote education

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ABSTRACT

The current remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy focus in Australia is focussed around the language and associated assumptions of 'Closing the Gap'. In order to address comparatively poor statistical results, the federal government has put considerable funds and effort into improving school attendance rates and in the Northern Territory; a review of Indigenous education is underway.

What seem to be missing in the language and policy dialogue, however, are the voices and priorities of the families of students who are the target of these policy interventions.

This paper draws on a wide range of interviews with Aṉangu (Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara) educators and community members where families speak on their own terms about the critical elements of a foundation for educational success. Whilst policy language positions the families of very remote Indigenous children as a 'disadvantage', families see themselves as the critical foundation for a child's success in western education.

INTRODUCTION

The Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people of the desert regions of Central Australia live in the region where the states of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory meet. This region is considered to be 'very remote'. Although many Aṉangu children experienced western style schooling from as early as 1940 in locations such as Ernabella (South Australia), Areyonga (Northern Territory) and Warburton (Western Australia), most communities and schools in the region were formally established between the 1960s and 1980s. Despite many efforts on both sides to engage children positively with schools, the schools and schooling outcomes are most frequently summarised as inferior, behind or simply, 'failing'.

The purpose of this paper is to amplify Aṉangu values, standpoints and perspectives on important considerations for strengthening young people, education and the future in Aṉangu communities. In doing so, I will then link the discussion to current policy propositions and practice with the aim of suggesting how we may better position remote schooling and education practice, informed by 'Red Dirt' (see Osborne and Guenther, 2013), local perspectives on these matters.

I begin by discussing some of the ethical and methodological considerations for this type of approach and outline the current Australian government policy approach to improving remote education. I then highlight some of the qualitative research data emerging through our research in very remote Central Australian schools and communities. In particular, I have drawn on discussion where Aṉangu participants explain the important elements of the foundations of a 'successful' learner in Aṉangu education from their own perspectives.

Finally, in discussing these matters, I make suggestions for how future policy initiatives may evolve in Aṉangu schools and very remote schools in Australia more broadly, taking account of the values and perspectives that are presented through this research process.

A COMPLEX AND CONTESTED SPACE

Education in very remote communities is a highly complex and contested space. There remains an obvious disconnect between the 'common sense' assumptions and the implicit values of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, the systems and policy context they work in and the implicit norms, values and assumptions of the students and families in very remote communities who are almost always Indigenous (Guenther et al., 2013, Bat and Guenther, 2013). This point is reflected in the data that shows school attendance rates, student retention, standardised test scores in English language literacy and numeracy, year 12 completion rates and transition to employment figures being lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than other students across the nation, but the 'gap' increases as the degree of remoteness increases (see for example, COAG Reform Council, 2013; Guenther, 2013; Long and North, 2009). One explanation for this data is that the more remote a school, the poorer the school's quality (see for example Hughes and Hughes, 2012). Another could be to assume that the data is directly related to the levels of 'dysfunction' in communities and if children were to be inserted into a 'functional' and 'successful' social and educational environment, then the gap will inevitably be closed (see for example ABC, 2013a; Penfold, June 1-2, 2013; Wilson, 2014).

According to Indigenous scholars such as Smith (1999), Rigney (1999) and Nakata et al (2012), it is important to see western education, its corresponding values, assumptions and accepted social and academic norms, as an already highly colonised space that inevitably reinforces the unequal standing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within the western education frame. Whilst Rigney (1999) and Smith (1999) both strongly argue for a 'decolonising' of education spaces and approaches, Nakata et al. (2012) urge university education faculties to resist involving students in the oversimplification of the Western/Indigenous knowledge binary, proposing that

> *...students might be more disposed to understanding the limits of their own thinking by engaging in open, exploratory, and creative inquiry in these difficult intersections, while building language and tools for describing and analysing what they engage with. (p.121)*

The increasing 'gap' in educational outcomes described above could well be summarised as a reflection of the increasing complexity and corresponding remoteness of distance between the life/knowledge worlds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities in relation to Western, dominant culture norms, aspirations and expectations (see Guenther, 2013; Osborne et al., 2014).

In describing the 'cultural interface' between Indigenous and Western knowledge(s), Nakata (2007a) summarises the knowledge contest:

> *In their differences, Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific ones are considered so disparate as to be "incommensurable" (Verran, 2005) or "irreconcilable" (Russel, 2005) on cosmological, epistemological and ontological grounds. (p.8)*

Late in 2013, the Australian federal government's policy approach to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education began to emerge with the two policy bookends of 'school attendance' and 'economic participation' making up two of the three remote community policy pillars as summarised in Tony Abbot's 'Closing the Gap' address (Abbott, 2014):

We will know that Aboriginal people are living better when children go to school, adults go to work and the ordinary law of the land is respected and enforced.

Whilst these are worthy goals, the simplistic nature of the policy rhetoric discounts the complexities that exist in the spaces between attending school and getting a job in very remote communities. Such a policy platform fails to take account of what other factors are at play in contributing to 'poorer' results and reinforces a wider publicly held view that remote education is 'behind', or simply 'failing'(Hughes and Hughes, 2012; ABC, 2013b). It also assumes an absence of other equally or even more important priorities that might be worth pursuing that could be critical to the future development of very remote education, economic development and the wellbeing of very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN REMOTE COMMUNITY RESEARCH

I am a non-Indigenous educator and researcher. My introduction to Aṉangu communities has grown from 1989 with regular trips to the region. I learned Pitjantjatjara language and began teaching the language in Adelaide schools before moving to Ernabella in the remote far north-west of South Australia in 2002 where I worked as a teacher, Deputy Principal and Principal until 2008. My wife Rebekah is Aṉangu and grew up at Amata. We raised our five children at Ernabella where my father in-law was born and we have lived in Alice Springs since 2009.

This paper draws on a range of data sources including community surveys, personal interviews and public presentations and publications where Aṉangu have contributed their perspectives on what is important for young people in education and life more broadly. I am also drawing on literatures, predominantly from Indigenous scholars as well as policy analysis and publications that have been developed within the Remote Education Systems project (see CRC-REP, 2014).

The task of informing educators, education leaders and education systems from remote Aboriginal perspectives as a non-Indigenous researcher carries significant professional, ethical and relational risks that are important to highlight here. On the one hand, there is a risk that by engaging with Aṉangu on their own terms in the education conversation, policy makers and education systems could take the view that this type of research is irrelevant to the pragmatic realities of the day to day challenges of remote schooling, seeing this type of approach as some form of romanticised and antiquated anthropological exercise. On the other hand, I need to be constantly mindful that the knowledge, experiences and perspectives I am engaging with as an outside researcher are not my own to represent. I don't own these perspectives and I need to ensure that I carefully explain and revisit the purpose and audience of the research with participants so that they are confident in making their contributions. Having developed long term relationships allows me to quickly build trust and encourage participation in the research process, but places a double burden of responsibility on me as a researcher in how I represent and translate (linguistically and more broadly) the contributions of Aṉangu to have relevance to current policy and practice in remote schooling.

In Aṉangu society, the personal/professional dichotomy is less distinct than western contexts and people will often readily participate in research where there is an existing personal relationship on the basis of the relationship, rather than the relative merits and ethics of the research process and its aims. It is critical that I move a research relationship into a clearly defined space of outside researcher and research participant so that the purpose of the work is clearly defined and prior informed consent is a thorough and patient process, clearly defining the boundaries and commitments on offer. There is a temptation to take short cuts in this regard, particularly where the time and expense of remote research places limitations on research activities (for further discussion on these issues, see Osborne, 2014). In my own situation, the need to maintain positive and trusting relationships with Aṉangu goes well beyond the life of a research project and so I need to ensure that I explain what I am asking people to do in multiple conversations in both formal and informal contexts.

Once the data has been collected, considering how the stories and the learning from the data can be shared back for the benefit of participants, their families and the broader community is also important. The potential benefits and risks of research need to be carefully considered and patiently explained in and out of context over time to build confidence and personal investment in the research dialogue. And finally, researchers need to follow through on the promises they make to communities and participants to ensure that research demonstrates the pursuit of a more equal, 'power-sensitive' (Haraway, 2004) conversation and exchange, a reciprocal relationship in action where participation and learning has tangible benefit to researcher, participant, their families and the wider community.

Smith (1999) argues that Indigenous research is necessarily about claims of (and on) power and justice:

> *It is because of this [historically unequal] relationship with power that we have been excluded, marginalised and 'Othered'... In this sense history is not important for Indigenous peoples because a thousand accounts of 'the truth' will not alter the 'fact' that indigenous peoples are still marginal and do not possess the power to transform history into justice. (p.35) [For further discussion on 'othering', see Sarra (2011) and Osborne (2014)]*

If, then, this research is to adopt a justice-oriented approach that attempts to re-position the power relationship between 'outside' researcher and Indigenous research participant that Smith (1999), Nakata(2007b) and Rigney (1999) argue has so often marginalised and disempowered Indigenous people and communities, it is important that I create a dialogue space where Aṉangu may speak on their own terms, in their own language on matters that are of upmost importance to their own lives. Internationally, Indigenous scholars have argued strongly for some time that not only Indigenous people, but Indigenous research methods hold a critical place in Indigenous research (see Bishop, 2011; Denzin et al., 2008; Mertens et al., 2013; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) in improving practice and outcomes in pursuit of a justice-oriented research praxis.

As a non-Indigenous 'outside' researcher, brokering the interchange between the competing priorities and demands of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices spoken on their own terms and the education systems and policy narratives

is not without risk. The role I take as a broker in this conversation combines an awareness of the limitations of my own position as a non-Indigenous 'outside' researcher, careful consideration of the cross-cultural space this work occupies and an approach that gives participants time to build confidence in their participation in the research. I also need to remain mindful of the importance of representing Aṉangu voices in the context of their contribution. These methodological considerations are further discussed in Guenther et al (2014).

POINTS OF PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics such as Nakata (2007a), Rigney (1999), Arbon (2008) and Ford (2010) highlight that western philosophies that underpin mainstream Australian society and the broader education system are at odds with the axiologies, epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, particularly in the contexts of very remote communities where people are often still living on their own 'country'. This is a critical point to understand in seeing very remote communities as part of the national collective, but with marked and distinct differences at their heart and foundation. This means that non-Indigenous, 'Red Dirt' (see Osborne and Guenther, 2013) educators in very remote contexts [1] cannot assume that their students and the communities to which they belong share their sense of the purpose of education and their 'common sense' assumptions about what education should prepare students for.

Additionally, Nakata (2007b) argues that multiple Indigenous standpoints exist between and within the diverse landscapes of Indigenous communities, languages and geographies. In the current political climate, policy makers and remote educators are likely to be exposed to the voices and ideas of prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island figures such as Noel Pearson (2011), Chris Sarra (2011), Marcia Langton (Ferrari, 2013) and Warren Mundine (2014), but these voices represent certain standpoints that are likely to differ significantly from the voices, experiences and positions that make up the very remote Aṉangu community context, for example.

A key focus of the Remote Education Systems project (for more information, see CRC-REP, 2014) has been to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in the research by drawing on the various voices that exist in the field, and in particular, to engage the less audible or unheard voices that exist in remote communities to better understand the local demands that remote communities place on educators and education systems (for further discussion see Osborne, 2014). In Aṉangu communities, these deeper conversations are frequently (and necessarily) held in local languages. They require multiple sittings and ample time to visit and revisit the core elements of the discussions. This is not simply a process of bringing policy rhetoric to a remote community and seeking to elicit responses to an externally derived agenda, but begins with the priorities and perspectives of Aṉangu, adopting an inside-out approach to informing educators, policy and education systems more broadly. Recording oral histories as a point of establishing personal and community histories, experiences and cultural connections in the dialogue are an important part of positioning Aṉangu in the dialogue about Aṉangu education as this information forms a basis of what Nakata (2007a) terms an 'Indigenous standpoint'.

Narrative and storytelling is an appropriate method for amplifying Aṉangu voice as Wilson (2008) describes:

> *Stories and metaphor are often used in Indigenous societies ...as a teaching tool. Stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and gain life lessons from a more personal perspective. By getting away from abstractions and rules, stories allow us to see others' life in a way that is difficult for abstract discussions to achieve. (p.17)*

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Baydala et al (2006), Ford (2005) and Gorman and Toombs (2009) all highlight the need for research in Indigenous contexts to be both inclusive and respectful of both Indigenous participants, (not simply as 'objects of research') and the knowledge systems, values and ontologies that exist in the Indigenous context. Research conducted by western researchers has become despised within so many Indigenous contexts globally as communities are left feeling diminished by colonial representations of the colonised that still dominate the broader bodies of research generated 'truths' about Indigenous peoples (Rigney, 1999). Internationally, Indigenous scholars explain that these tensions also exist within the daily practice of delivering western education and call for Indigenous languages, epistemologies and ontologies to be prioritised in the process of educating Indigenous students (see Alan Ijiig, 2000; Battiste, 2002; Garcia, J., 2011a; Garcia, O., 2011b; Grande, 2004, 2009).

EXPLORING THE RHETORIC AND REALITY GAP

In 'The Trouble with Hearing' (Osborne, 2014) I describe a research workshop in the remote Central Desert community of Yuendumu held with Yapa (Warlpiri) researchers where the community researchers wanted to explore avenues to improve school attendance rates. I conducted a trial interview asking all of the 'obvious questions' such as: Is school important? Why is it important? Should children go to school every day? Who is responsible for ensuring children attend school? As expected, I received all of the 'obvious answers' ('yes, school is important for reading and writing, getting a job, the parents are responsible' and so on) until a child walked into the room in the middle of the day and it was revealed that this child was not only absent from school, he was the child of the woman who had just solemnly declared that school attendance was critical and 'irresponsible' parents need to lose their parenting welfare payments or have a visit from the police. As described further in the article, this provided a fortuitous platform for a deeper discussion about what is really going on for families in their engagement with the school.

Firstly, a sister of the woman I was interviewing was there. She explained that if the mother was to try and force the child to do something against his will, she would be considered to be abusing the rights of the child to make decisions for themselves and that it would be her (the sister's) responsibility to intervene on behalf of the child. So in fact, despite the mother having just explained that parents were solely responsible for ensuring children attend school and should be punished for non-attendance, a fuller group discussion highlighted the complexity for Aboriginal people in the Tanami region (north west of Alice Springs) in this regard, given that the parents seem to have little influence over the (particularly older) children if they are determined not to attend school. In fact, there is a risk for the parents of a consequence from within

the family if they are seen to be overly forceful in attempting to cajole the child to do something they don't want to do. From a Yapa perspective (as described to me), 'it's really about respecting the child' (Osborne, 2011).

Based on the framework of Nakata's (2007a) cultural interface, the researchers began to mark out a 'values interface' where Yapa and Kardiya (western) values come into conflict for Yapa children in classrooms with Kardiya teachers.

One of the senior men in the group explained the first of the identified conflicting values:

> *From the moment Kardiya are born, they are taught to be responsible and to have responsibility. If they're not responsible, they get in to trouble. But for us, for Yapa, we are taught to give unconditionally and if we don't give, there's a consequence. In fact, Yapa law tells us that this is what we have to do. Can you see that these two things* (being responsible and unconditional giving) *don't mix and it's hard for Yapa children in the classroom to know what to do? (Osborne, 2011 p.3)*

This is an important discussion in that it reminds educators that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children sitting in very remote classrooms with (frequently) non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, the teacher's unspoken social and academic assumptions and expectations can be somewhat bewildering for the students as they are often incongruent with the home life experiences of the child. Delpit (1993) describes these implicit social and academic norms as the 'codes of power' (p.134). As Delpit argues, it is important for teachers who are 'participants' in the 'culture of power' (p.122) to recognise that where students have not had 'the leisure of a lifetime of to learn [the rules of the culture of power], explicit presentation [of these rules or 'codes'] makes learning immeasurably easier' (p.123), and needs to be done in such a way as to still respect the child's culture and heritage.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF A 'SUCCESSFUL' LEARNER IN ANANGU EDUCATION

One of the policy assumptions that needs to be challenged, therefore, is that 'Closing the Gap' in school attendance rates between very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students across the nation will correlate to 'Closing the Gap' in performance measures such as standardised literacy and numeracy test results (NAPLAN – National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy, see ACARA (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority), 2011). Guenther (2013) explains that for very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, the data shows a relationship between attendance rates and NAPLAN scores that is so small that attendance explains less than 10% of the variance in NAPLAN scores (see also Osborne et al., 2014). James Ladwig and Alan Luke (2013) went further in describing the attendance and performance relationship in stating that:

> *...in schools with significant Indigenous populations, there is no overall relationship between improved attendance and achievement at a school level. (p.19) [emphasis mine]*

As they further explain, remote schools that experience a decrease in attendance are just as likely to see an improvement in NAPLAN scores as schools where attendance increases.

It is critical that educators of very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students understand and acknowledge the existence of 'other codes' (see Delpit, 1993) and resist simplistic assumptions about the apparent non-existence of historical and cultural difference, instead seeing their work as educators for the recognition of, and engagement with alternative epistemologies, histories and values as an act of educating for justice (see Smith, 1999).

ANANGU PERSPECTIVES ON PREPARING ANANGU CHILDREN FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

In seeking to privilege Aṉangu perspectives on what are important considerations for Aṉangu education and growing strong and confident young people, I want to move the discussion away from how western educators might better acculturate remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to western values and social and academic norms. The voices of Aṉangu educators and community members as they speak on their own terms about the values, knowledge(s) and perspectives that inform their children in the remote schooling interaction have much to teach non-Indigenous educators. Their deep aspects of identity and self are not easily visible or accounted for by remote educators but are critical in informing a strong and justice-oriented approach to a 'successful' education in Aṉangu schools. Here Aṉangu describe the complexities and more 'hidden' aspects of what matters to Aṉangu in their engagement with schooling and education for success.

Aṉangu educator, Katrina Tjitayi (in Osborne et al., 2014) describes the critical foundations of supporting successful children in these terms:

> *If a tree is not growing properly, we have to seek really hard to find the problem. When we look at the tree, we see only the top part but we need to look deeper at the roots. We must look deep inside to see what is not working. In Anangu education, sometimes we spend all of our time looking at the leaves and the branches, but we need to look well below the ground to understand what it is that is really happening for our children.*
>
> *When a tree grows from a seed, sometimes it needs help. If a tree isn't strong enough to stand on its own, it can't grow. It needs to be tied to a stake so that it can use the strength of the stake to stand and grow so that eventually it can stand as a strong tree on its own. We need to see the education process as beginning from a seed and think about how we support the growth of our children to stand strong on their own. (p.10)*

Makinti Minutjukur PYEC (Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee) Director (in Osborne et al., 2014) highlights the foundations of Aṉangu power, language, land, stories and family as critical to succeeding in western knowledge systems:

> *It seems that we are continually behind. But now we want to go forward. The government has given us this opportunity for our children to get better knowledge and we really want this.*

But we don't want to leave behind all our strengths and our power in order to receive this new knowledge. We must keep our language, our stories, our lands and our family connections. These are things that give us power in our land. (p.8)

As described more fully in 'Red Dirt Thinking on Aspiration and Success' (Osborne and Guenther, 2013), Pitjantjatjara language does not share the terms or concepts of 'aspiration' or 'success' that tend to be seen as critical in the current policy dialogue about remote education. Rather, we see the language of confidence/courage (rapa), strength (kunpu) and consideration of the child's spirit (kurunpa) emerge and re-emerge as critical underpinnings for Aṉangu children to succeed in Western and other learning contexts.

Again, Katrina Tjitayi informs remote educators (Osborne and Guenther, 2013):

Children learn well when people continually talk to them. The words that are spoken are received by the child's spirit when they are spoken gently and with patience. It is this spirit that gives the child confidence. The learning enters into their spirit and remains with them. It is not on paper, but in their spirit.

It is in this way that I learned to search and dig for honey ants. All of this knowledge is in my spirit. It is there for always. I don't need to look up the instructions in a book. It is deep in my spirit.

In this same way, we must carefully watch over our children's spirits. We shouldn't keep telling them that they are dumb. Don't wound them. It is this same spirit that is working in the child to make them strong. (p.11)

As Tjitayi explains, the ontological positioning of learning and the learner, the locus of knowledge and the pedagogical considerations for effective learning differ vastly in their language and epistemological assumptions to that of the life experience of most non-Aṉangu remote educators.

In an interview with a senior Pitjantjatjara elder, I asked him to explain how Piranpa (non-Indigenous) educators might support the kind of things that Aṉangu continually talk about as important in a successful education, such as identity, belonging, language and Aṉangu values. He explained it in these terms (Elder, 2013):

Yes, they (the teachers) come after, but children must learn their father's (ways) first, through their parents, (and) their older brothers and older sisters must continually teach them. To learn their culture and... then they will understand from the teacher, 'Yes that is their story that they're telling' ...(the children are) learning and understanding that they're learning from knowledge that belongs to the teacher.

...the teacher (can be involved) after this, that's absolutely fine. After the foundational knowledge; Anangu culture taught by the family. Like how your parents taught you through stories at a young age. Having done that, you always live without fear. And you're set. (p.4-5, translation mine)

As Tjitayi and Minutjukur have also emphasised, the foundation of strong family support, a strengthened identity and connection to important stories that locate students in the physical, cultural and education landscape positions Aṉangu children to confidently embrace new and unfamiliar social and knowledge propositions

'without fear' and with an 'open spirit' (see Tjitayi and Osborne, 2014). This approach stands in direct contrast to some of the assumptions and rhetoric of improving remote education by 'Closing the Gap'. The apparent 'failure' and continued poor comparative statistical results can lead to policy language and thinking that very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children arrive at school as behind, or deficient in some way, and that it's almost 'too late' to 'rescue them' and close the inevitable gap in education outcomes. This logic unquestioningly and uncritically privileges the values associated with neo-liberal positions, built as they are on theories of human capital and the economic benefit that accrues from investment in education (for further discussion, see McRae-Williams and Guenther, 2014, Guenther and McRae-Williams, 2014).

This type of approach tends to lead to an argument where the logical 'solution' is to have children at much younger ages being engaged in formalised western social and academic contexts to ameliorate the inevitable disadvantage these children will face (see, for example Good to Great Schools Australia, 2014, Wilson, 2014).

Whilst there are considerable and well thought out arguments in this vein (see for example, Good to Great Schools Australia, 2014) that argue the logic of ameliorating disadvantage drawing on research into poverty, childhood developmental delay and the broader umbrella term of 'disadvantage' itself, it is interesting to note a strongly emerging contrast between this type of rhetoric and Aṉangu perspectives on the relative successes of children in schools. The essential point of difference seems to revolve around the point that the logic and language of 'Closing the Gap' proponents argue the need to plug gaps caused by a 'disadvantage', whereas Aṉangu community members tend to demand that their capacities for advantaging their children in a whole range of important developmental areas are recognised and are also incorporated into the education experiences of their children (see, for example Burton and Osborne, 2014, Tjitayi and Osborne, 2014, Osborne et al., 2014). One bemoans the deficit (gap) and the other despairs the seemingly constant denial of the latent potential in remote families and communities which is treated as either unnecessary or, worse, a hindrance.

Katrina Tjitayi (Osborne et al., 2014) highlights the contrast in perspectives on what 'Closing the Gap' means to her in these terms:

> *There are many gaps in our children's spirits and they can't close them on their own... When a child is afraid, he can't learn. This is the way we can close the gaps.*
>
> *The child is in the middle and his family are around him... When the family watches over him, the child feels secure. The mother and father can help the child to be brave and to learn new things.*
>
> *Our children need to learn together with us as one spirit. Our spirits are like a solid rock for them to stand on. (p.12)*

Tjitayi chooses to reinforce the irreplaceable and critical nature of family to provide a firm foundation for success in all aspects of a child's life, rather than adapting the logic of ameliorating deficit caused by the children's family background and inevitable 'disadvantage'. Whilst Tjitayi (Tjitayi and Osborne, 2014, Osborne et al., 2014) and Minutjukur (Osborne et al., 2014, Minutjukur and Osborne, 2014) are both fully

aware of the evidence and concerns in relation to educational disadvantage and the need to address disadvantage in health and education, they both continue to choose to advocate a position of seeing Aṉangu culture, histories, family and capacities as critical in advantaging Aṉangu children in their development and preparation for success, including in western education.

YOUNGER PERSPECTIVES ON PREPARING ANANGU CHILDREN FOR SUCCESS IN EDUCATION

As outlined earlier, there is a risk that these positions, as spoken by senior Aṉangu, may be regarded as both overly-sentimental and perhaps unrealistic in having any pragmatic application to a modern schooling context as children embrace an ever changing (global) cultural landscape and the national desire to 'Close the Gap' in English literacy and numeracy and other measures. But of note, whilst couched within other themes of importance to younger people, the messages outlined above find full voice in the echoes of younger generations, spoken with equal enthusiasm and eloquence.

Rueben Burton (Burton and Osborne, 2014) is a younger and emerging Aṉangu education leader and reinforces the irreplaceable importance of intergenerational engagement within families as a core element of building confidence and subsequent successful engagement with the social and academic challenges that face Aṉangu in their pursuit of Western education:

> *The parents hold the future for the children. Piranpa teachers hold "keys" to the future, but they don't understand Anangu ways, so it's Anangu that give the future to their children. There are so many new opportunities and tools out there, and once the parents have these experiences, they will hand that confidence and "the future" to their children. They will have a language for that experience.*
>
> *Even though I tried very hard to learn (in boarding school), some of the things that they were trying to teach us in school didn't really make sense until much later, but now I have a language for that and I give that to my children. (p.36)*

In another interview, a young mother and father described their plans to equip their young son for 'success' in terms of survival, strength and confidence building (Miitararangku, 2013):

> *[Teaching the culture] is important because it's been here for thousands of years and we can't just dump that.*
>
> *... He's Anangu. He knows his culture, our stories, his country; it's from Anangu. And he'll hold that, he'll never forget about that.*
>
> *...my son will know that he's got something good, important to pass on to his kids. It makes them strong in understanding life from Anangu way. Then that little boy will grow up and think, 'Ok, I grew up Anangu way, I understand from this point of view. Ok, I might step over the other side.*

Others only really know one way. If you learn two (ways), you'll be strong and you can survive anything. (p.11)

And further, a Yankunytjatjara mother (Kungka, 2013) responds to the question:

'What do you think is going to be important for Aṉangu in school; thinking ahead to the future, what's going to matter in 20, 30, 50, 100 years' time?

What's going to matter is that we know where we come from, we know our family history. We know the history of land rights, that we know about the history of past events like the bomb, the Maralinga testing... It shouldn't be written out of history, it needs to be written into history. It needs to be taught at school.

...I think if you're strong in your identity, you're a bit more resilient and robust and able to get through those tough times...When we lose our grandparents, our roles change and our responsibilities change and hopefully we're prepared to fit into those roles and continue what they did. (p.9)

Perhaps the most explicit summary of Aṉangu engagement with Western education is provided by Makinti Minutjukur (Minutjukur and Osborne, 2014):

I (Makinti) have clearly outlined a passion and willingness to embrace the "witulya mulapa" (genuine power) that (white) education offers, but want to strongly emphasize that this is not a case of "cut and run". As Anangu, we have our own power that we wish to retain and this power is to be carried forward in the pursuit of the power that education offers. (p.19)

The message that identity, confidence, family connection, family language, histories and stories are critical to positioning young people for success in all aspects of life is repeated over and over across the qualitative data. The message is clear and consistent across adult generations (note that this paper has not drawn on data from interviews with children or teenagers), genders, languages and life experiences. The risk with over (or solely) emphasising narrow, externally imagined 'solutions' to the 'problem' of remote education (such as simply addressing school attendance) is that educators, policy makers and systems may completely overlook the most powerful asset the local school has in achieving success; the intergenerational assets of the child's family and the community more broadly.

SEEING COMMUNITY PRIORITIES IN THE BROADER NARRATIVE

The Northern Territory government has recently undertaken a review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (see Wilson, 2014). Through this process, it appears likely that the 'effective instruction' model that has been implemented in the Cape York region (see Good to Great Schools Australia, 2014) will be implemented across remote schools in the Northern Territory. The better recognised description for this approach is the term 'Direct Instruction'. Whilst the majority of 'Aṉangu Schools' are located in the neighbouring states of South Australia and Western Australia, many Aṉangu schools are situated in the Southern region of the Northern

Territory and the policy themes and implications have a broader relevance for all Aṉangu schools as well as very remote schools generally.

The education model that encapsulates the effective instruction approach is known as 'the enabling system' (see Good to Great Schools Australia, 2014). This model places 'effective instruction' as a 'keystone' with eight vital supports to the keystone; four from the 'supply side' (school governance, school leader, training and coaching, teacher) and four from the 'demand side' of education (community, parents, student welfare, student).

The purpose of raising this approach here is not to analyse the relative merits of Direct Instruction, (for further discussion, see Fogarty & Schwab, 2012; Good to Great Schools Australia, 2014; Luke, 2014) but to identify and place the Aṉangu perspectives highlighted above within a broader framework which is likely to inform currently emerging remote education policy in the Northern Territory. In the enabling arch, the community, parents, student welfare and the student make up one of two legs that hold the keystone in place. The model and the corresponding literatures suggest that an instructional method must be considered within the context of intentional and significant social and educational investment and reform across the corresponding eight areas.

The effective instruction model not only offers a home within remote education for the priorities that have been strongly advocated above by Aṉangu, but insists that they are important parts of education and broader community-wide reform for success. The demand side of the model needs to be seriously considered as a non-negotiable aspect of the broader reform agenda that is proposed. A blanket policy approach inevitably needs to be re-contextualised to suit localised demands and priorities and this is an important consideration for school leaders and the broader system in their work as they take any uniform model any apply it to their unique and particular remote community context . The positions outlined in this paper give some clear guidelines as to the priorities of Aṉangu parents, communities and educators for their own children. Put plainly, there is a danger that investing in a 'keystone' (pedagogy) without investment in the 'enabling arch' renders a singular focus on pedagogy impotent in the very remote contexts I am describing.

Other aspects of the Wilson review focus on important and predictable areas such as early childhood education programs (p.11), teacher quality (p.17) and funding models (p.17). Of note, recommendations 21-26 focus on 'community engagement' (p.15-16) which suggests this is a priority. But in examining the language of these recommendations, it seems that all of the power and responsibility for change in achieving improved outcomes through community engagement lies with the system. The language of deficit dominates the logic for engaging families, rather than the language of seeing family engagement as critical to setting 'confident', 'strong' and 'open spirited' (Tjitayi and Osborne, 2014) children into schools 'without fear' (Elder, 2013), and ready to embrace new social and academic 'codes' (Delpit, 1993).

The language of 'community engagement' in the Wilson review (2014) includes:

> *Community engagement should focus on existing agreements, community goals and the implementation of department priorities. (p.18)*

SHIFTING THE LANGUAGE

Taking a step back, the language of community engagement recommended in the Wilson review and the underpinning assumptions of deficit and disadvantage stands in stark contrast to the language of the Aṉangu educators and community members interviewed. The review neglects, even assumes the absence of family and community in its capacity to advantage students, while Aṉangu highlight that 'success' is wholly dependent on family members in building confidence, identity, aspiration and a strong foundation for success in education. As outlined above, any approach to school reform (as per the effective instruction 'enabling arch') rests heavily on a strong base of family, community and student welfare. None of the Aṉangu participants in this study reject success in western education in terms of the measures so often cited such as attendance, English literacy and numeracy measures, school completion, or transitions to employment as unworthy goals. Yet *all* of the participants take great care to describe the necessary foundations for Aṉangu students to succeed in western education as non-negotiable.

These statements call on systems and educators to reconsider their assumptions and power positions in engaging with the families of very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. They ask educators to re-think the relative value of families, their knowledge and their power to inscribe an unshakeable foundation of identity, belonging and a preparedness to engage unfamiliar social and academic codes with confidence. It also sets a standard for Aṉangu families, demanding that they take up their responsibility to position children on a 'solid rock' foundation for success, both within and outside of formal western education contexts. The onus can never lie with governments, schools and Piranpa (non-Aṉangu) educators to provide a sense of confidence, identity and belonging, although they can do much to make room for and expect meaningful family contributions in the formal schooling process.

To re-write the beginning phrases of recommendations for improved community engagement and educational success from the Aṉangu views expressed above, statements may read quite differently. Here are a few suggestions for some recommendation 'sentence starters' taken from Aṉangu:

- … look well below the ground to understand what it is that is really happening for our children. *(in Osborne et al., 2014)*
- We must keep our language, our stories, our lands and our family connections. These are things that give us power in our land. *(in Osborne et al., 2014)*
- …your parents [teach] you through stories at a young age… Having done that, you always live without fear. And you're set. *(Elder, 2013)*
- Others only really know one way. If you learn two (ways), you'll be strong and you can survive anything. *(Miitararangku, 2013)*
- As Aṉangu, we have our own power that we wish to retain and this power is to be carried forward in the pursuit of the power that education offers. *(Minutjukur and Osborne, 2014)*

- What's going to matter is that we know where we come from, we know our family history. *(Kungka, 2013)*

- The parents hold the future for the children. *(in Burton and Osborne, 2014)*

CONCLUSION

In the rhetoric about remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, entrenched language describing 'disadvantage', 'failure' and the need to 'Close the Gap' has established a 'power-laden' (Haraway, 2004) discourse that tends to consign very remote children's family, identity and culture to a position of inadequacy or irrelevance in the push to 'end disadvantage'. This language and paradigm is not shared by Aṉangu educators and community members in qualitative interviews undertaken in the research on which this paper is based.

Aṉangu share strong and consistent language about meeting the social and emotional needs of Aṉangu children in positioning them for success in and out of western education contexts. By taking account of these consistently and strongly iterated positions, remote education can reposition children, families and schooling in the interaction with western education. Aṉangu educators agree with the broader aims of education in its potential to empower young people through strong literacy and numeracy skills, confidence and competence in western social and employment contexts and the power that western education offers in moving in and across knowledge, social and cultural domains. The point of stark difference between policy rhetoric and Aṉangu perspectives remains in the perceived worth of a child's family in its existing capacity to position children for success in this regard. Shifting the language and assumptions to better reflect the positive views expressed by Aṉangu in their willingness and capacity to provide a strong foundation for success in education is a worthwhile starting point for remote educators and the systems they work in as an important avenue to improving education in very remote schooling.

In closing, I will leave the final words for Katrina Tjitayi (in Osborne et al., 2014) to reiterate her view that the child's family, from an Aṉangu perspective, is so much more than a 'disadvantage' or an unavoidable 'other' in pursuing justice and equality through education; they are the foundation for success:

> *The mother and father are the solid rock for the child and it is from them that they find the strength to try new things. It has always been this way that our families are our rock and we have held our stories in our spirits and grew up strong and confident with our stories intact.*
>
> *But our way is very different. We don't have only a father and mother. Our children have lots of family. They have sisters, brothers, uncles and aunties and grandparents and other close family. This is the way we protect our children.*
>
> *Our children will grow strong in their learning at school when their families stand with them as that strong solid rock. They will be strong and confident through our spirits. We are using our spirits as a foundation for the children. If the child's parents are weak, then the extended family will come alongside him to support him. (p.13)*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 at Ernabella Aṉangu School in the remote North West of South Australia. He 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 South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. He is currently a member of the WETT (Warlpiri Education and Training Trust) Advisory Board.

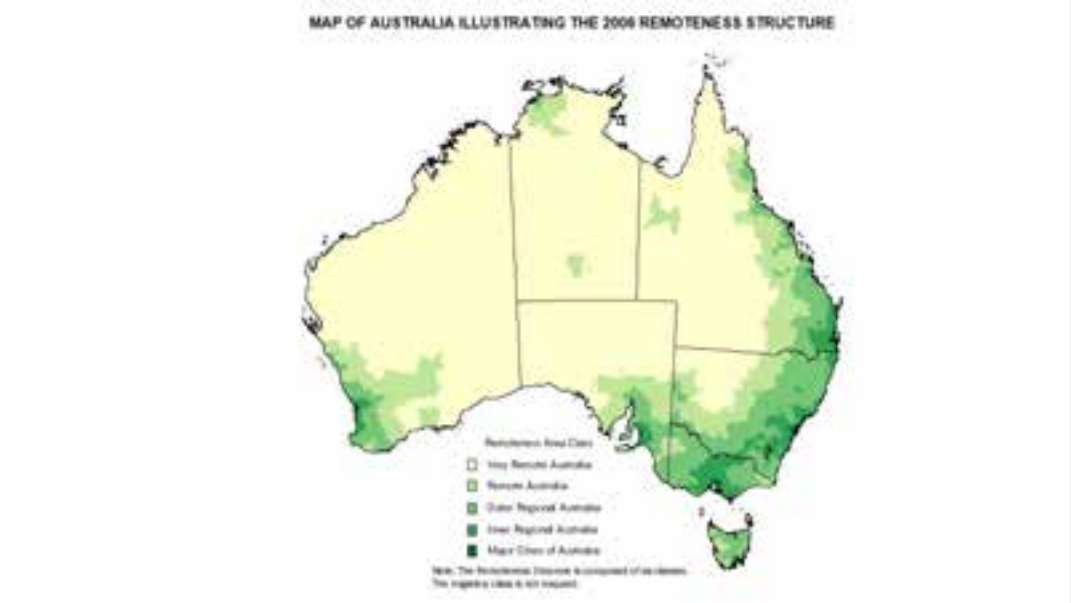
He is currently working as a Senior Research Fellow at UniSA within the Remote Education Systems project. The project within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) is a five year project designed to investigate how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations, aspirations and needs (see CRC-REP, 2014). The project has sought to support and encourage remote educators and community members to join the dialogue about remote education through a range of avenues such as participating in workshops through to presentations and academic publications. Sam is also a PhD candidate at Victoria University, Melbourne.

1. VERY REMOTE AUSTRALIA

The context of the research conducted by the CRC-REP is very remote Australia as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Classification Structure (ABS, 2011). The CRC-REP's concern is predominantly with very remote Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales. Apart from isolation and remoteness from the capital cities of Australia, this context is marked by relatively high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, many of who live in discrete communities (Ninti One Limited, 2013). The population 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. Education and training is one example of this. (from Guenther and McRae-Williams, 2014)

This map gives an indication of the distribution of the 'remote' and 'very remote' regions of Australia:

Image 1
Source: ABS (2011)



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ART PIECE

Wanampi mankur mankurpa kutjara
Gordon Ingkatji

Courtesy of the artist and Ernabella Arts Inc.

GORDON INGKATJI

Birth Place Titu
Language Pitjantjatjara
Community Pukatja : SA

Gordon was born at Titu, c. 1930. His family was si ng at Puta--Puta when they first saw whitefellas -- Gordon was about 8 years old. He arrived at Ernabella Mission in 1937. He worked in the office at Ernabella with Bill Edwards, the Superintendent in the 1950's. He has taught Pitjantjatjara language at Adelaide University and in Alice Springs. Gordon is the Choir Master with the

Pitjantjatjara Choir (formerly Ernabella Choir). Gordon commenced pain ng with Tjungu Palya Art Centre, Nyapari in 2007. As he spends most of his time at his homeland David's Well, near Ernabella, he began painting with Ernabella Arts in 2008.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014 Desert Mob 2014 -- Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs NT

2014 Nganana Kulilpai Nganampa Tjukurpa -- Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne VIC

2011 Ernabella Undiscovered -- Tunbridge Gallery, Margaret River WA

2011 We know our Land, We keep our Land -- Raft ArtSpace, Alice Springs NT

2010 Ara irititja munu ara kuwaritja Ernabella--la -- Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne VIC

2010 A Wati--Ku Show -- Raft Artspace, Alice Springs NT

2010 Recent Paintings -- Chapman Gallery, Manuka, ACT

2010 Ngura Nganampa (Our Country) -- Outstation, Darwin NT

2010 Desert Mob -- Araluen Art Centre, Alice Springs NT

2010 Kayili and Ernabella 2010 -- Aboriginal and Pacific Art, Sydney, NSW

2009 Nyangatja nganampa Tjukurpa (These are our stories) -- Aboriginal and Pacific Art, Sydney, NSW

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2007 Uwankara Ngura Palya (with Tjungu Palya) -- Randell Lane Fine Art, Perth, WA

2007 Our Mob (with Tjungu Palya) -- Adelaide Festival Centre, Adelaide, SA

THEMES

Malara
Minyma kutjara
Wanampi (Rainbow Serpent

MEDIUMS

Ceramics
Collections
ARALUEN ARTS CENTRE, 2014

WANAMPI MANKUR MANKURPA KUTJARA KUTJARA

Ten Wanampi Tjukurpa. “These ten places are for Anangu drinking, Wanampi separate. Wanampi not walking like Anangu, move like a whip. That wanampi mother and father they staying separate, not going anywhere but tjitji tjuta coming and playing around them. They making friends. Mulpa tjutunga.”