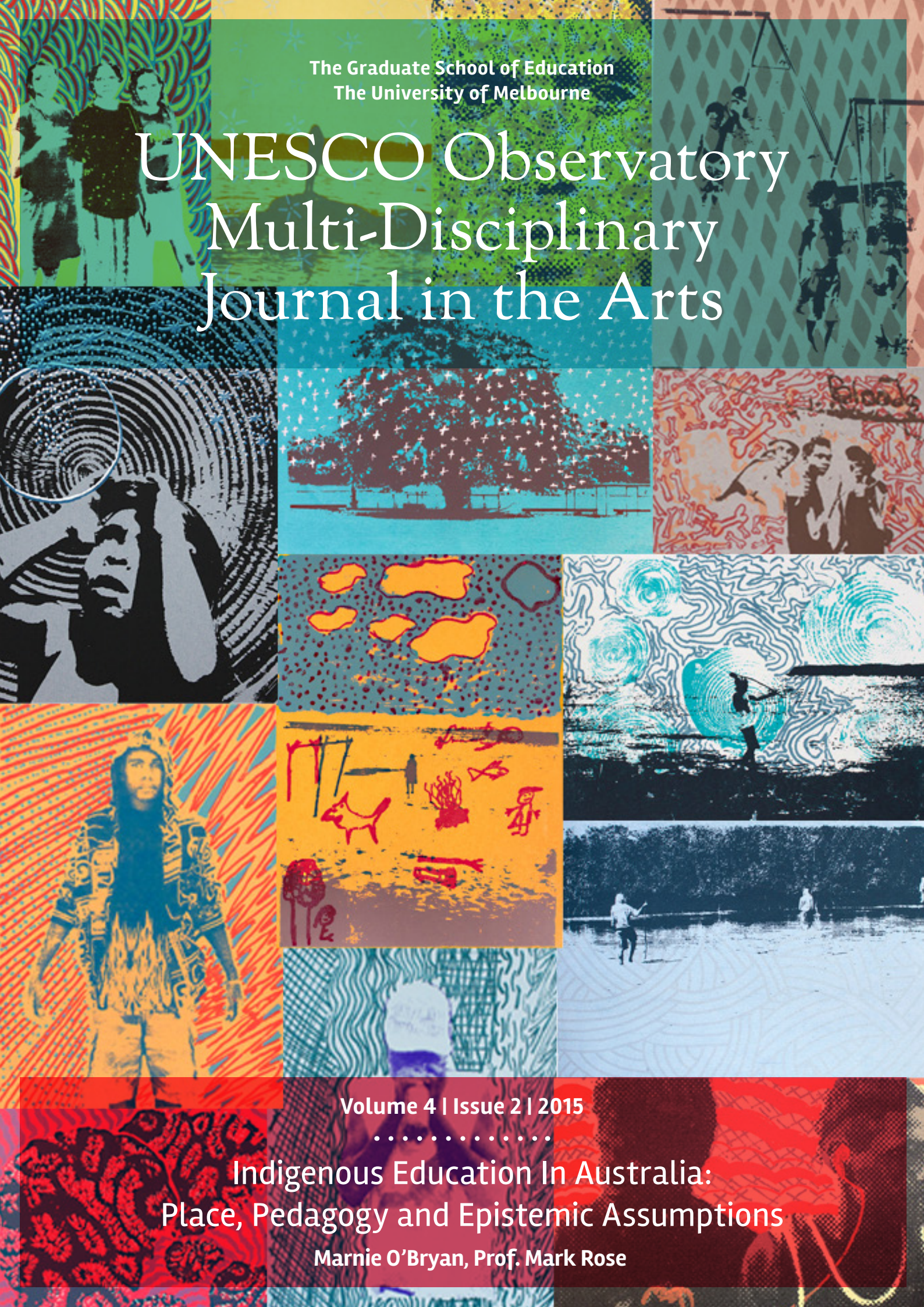


The Graduate School of Education  
The University of Melbourne

# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts



Volume 4 | Issue 2 | 2015

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## Indigenous Education In Australia: Place, Pedagogy and Epistemic Assumptions

Marnie O'Bryan, Prof. Mark Rose

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# Volume 4, Issue 2

## 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



***Gungura – the Spiralling Wind***  
**Samuel Namundja**

Courtesy of the Artist

**Dr William Fogarty**  
*National Centre for Indigenous Studies*  
*The Australian National University*

**Dr Melissa Lovell**  
*National Centre for Indigenous Studies*  
*The Australian National University*

**Professor Mick Dodson**  
*National Centre for Indigenous Studies*  
*The Australian National University*

## ABSTRACT

Education for remote Indigenous students in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) has long been characterized by policy failure. In recent years, the 'solution' to this vexing policy problem has involved a deliberate, incremental shift towards 'mainstream' educational approaches. This includes an increased focus on testing regimes and structured English literacy and numeracy programs, and has led to increased bureaucratic oversight, broad-based 'benchmarking' of student achievement, and a problematic emphasis on statistical disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student populations. In this paper we analyse the NT Government's latest review into Indigenous education - the *A share in the future* report - to challenge the normative social and cultural assumptions that permeate Indigenous educational discourses and pedagogic approaches. We argue that current notions about 'the way forward' can lead to the development of poor policy and actually serve to thwart Indigenous educational aspirations.

## KEYWORDS

*remote education, Indigenous education, Aboriginal, education policy, Northern Territory, Australia.*

1.

The authors acknowledge Dr Jerry Schwab of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), ANU and Ms Corinne Walsh of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies, ANU for their excellent and timely feedback on drafts of this article. Similarly this paper has been made far stronger by the comments of anonymous reviewers. We thank you for your insights.

2.

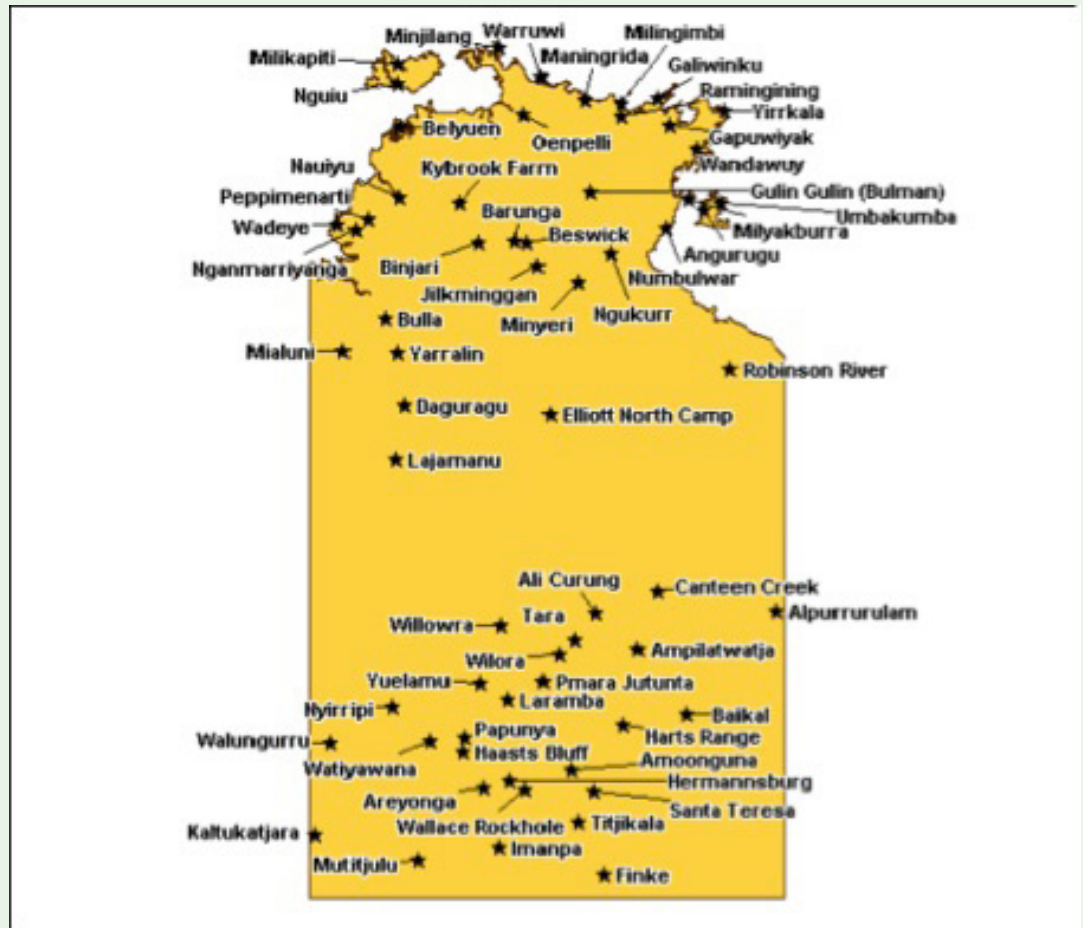
The last major review was the Collins review (Collins 1999).

## **A VIEW BEYOND REVIEW: CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS IN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>**

There can be little doubt that Australian Indigenous education is a complex area of policy and development. For over fifty years, education for remote Indigenous students in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia (see Figure I) has been characterized by under-resourcing and discourses of failure. For example, a litany of research has bemoaned the poor attendance at school by Indigenous students in remote Australia (Binnion & Lunnay 1974; Bourke et al. 2000; Groome & Hamilton 1995; Kays & Romaszko 1995; NBEET 1992; Watts & Gallagher 1964)

Over the last decade the 'solution' for this vexing policy problem has been an incremental and deliberate shift away from localized forms of educational development that acknowledge and include Indigenous wants and needs (Lingard et al. 2013). This article focuses on *A share in the future* report (Wilson 2014), published in May 2014 and the latest review of Indigenous education in the NT.<sup>2</sup> While a paper critiquing the recommendations of the review is certainly warranted, this article mainly focuses on unpacking the assumptions that underpin the review. Our analysis is based on an approach to policy analysis that recognizes that policy 'problems' are actively produced as part of policy making, and which seeks to unearth the 'deep-seated' cultural values and political rationalities that underpin and define policy problems (Bacchi 2009: 1-7). In this context, we use the *A share in the future* review as an in-depth illustration - and exposition - of the normative social and cultural norms that have come to characterize Indigenous educational discourses and pedagogic approaches in Australia.

Figure 1  
Major remote communities in the Northern Territory of Australia (Influential Missions and Outreach Inc. 2013).



We interpret this latest review of Indigenous education as characteristic of two trends that coalesce to have a deleterious effect on Indigenous learning and education. The first of these is a broader international trend towards standardisation and commodification in education. The second is the Australian trend toward Indigenous Affairs policy normalisation, where policy success is defined narrowly as the attainment of statistical parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The first part of this paper situates the review in its broader international and domestic context. We then focus our analysis on the rhetoric and recommendations of the *A share in the future* report. We unpack the main types of assumptions in the report, and argue that these assumptions both constrict debate about education in remote Indigenous communities and re-position education as a technical and bureaucratic – rather than socio-political and pedagogic – challenge. In this way the solutions to complex educational issues are ‘rendered technical’ (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007: 10-11). This results in the silencing of Indigenous voices in the policymaking process.

## INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC INFLUENCES ON EDUCATION POLICY

The last decade’s trend towards standardised testing in education policy has been driven by measurement and by increasingly commodified, generic pedagogic approaches. John Finschetti (2014) shows that this is a global movement by tracing the spread of such approaches through parts of the western world, with their beginnings in Great Britain, spreading to Canada and the US and gaining traction under the *No Child Left*

*Behind Policy* of President George Bush Jr. This movement, most demonstrated by Charter schools in the US, has in essence allowed for the increasing privatisation of education and for moves away from investment in localised public education by government (Bracey 2002). With this have come increasingly standardised pedagogic approaches, and the packaging of readymade literacy and numeracy programs. Readymade literacy and numeracy programs such as Direct Instruction, which ensure that 'all details of instruction' are controlled so as to 'minimize the chance of students' misinterpreting the information being taught and to maximize the reinforcing effect of instruction,' provide just one example of such standardized approaches (National Institute for Direct Instruction 2014). In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Undermine Education* (2010) Dianne Ravitch - one of the original proponents of such policies during her time as the US Assistant Secretary for Education, but who has since reversed her position - heavily critiques this form of educational development. Ravitch argues that the de-pedagogising and de-professionalising of teachers that 'drill and kill' or 'stop, drop, and test' education promotes must be seen in the light of a broader global project of privatisation and commodification. Ravitch, among others (see, for example, Zeichner 2010), argues that the development of 'education by numbers' has been driven by right wing think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation in the US, and by large corporate business whose interest in education is purely economic. Fischetti (2014) concurs, stating that the current Australian context 'mirrors the interdependence of the world's economic and educational market places. International think tanks funded by multinational corporations and their foundations now govern the direction of school reform' (See also Tienken & Orlich 2013: 318). This is manifest in increasing pressure to move education to a user pays system and to promote choice and competition which, under a neo-liberal rubric, will supposedly automatically produce a better product (in this case education).

In Australia, these global education movements have meshed with a long history of deficit discourse in Indigenous affairs policy aimed at addressing what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 'lack' (Forde et al. 2013). This has a tradition found in social Darwinism and the establishment of a 'race paradigm' in the 1800s, followed by the protectionist era of policy from the late 1890s through to 1950s (Sanders 2002). Policy became a tool of repression during this period; indeed, education policy was aimed at disenfranchising the cultural fabric of Indigenous communities. Key components of cultural production such as language and cosmology transmission were deliberately subverted. So deep was the deficit applied to Aboriginality that it was commonly seen as best to educate culture 'away' or 'out' of the Indigenous subject (Gorringe 2011; Nakata et al. 2012).

In more recent times a more nuanced manifestation of deficit has permeated policy settings. Political rhetoric is characterized by 'deficit discourses'; that is, by modes of language and representation that frame Aboriginal identity within a narrative of deficiency, negativity, dysfunctionality and disempowerment (Fforde et al. 2013; Guenther et al. 2013; Lovell 2012, 2014). A focus on the statistical 'gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is one of the most common manifestations of deficit discourses. Indeed, attempts to quantify this 'gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has become the default approach to defining policy problems in Australian Indigenous Affairs. This is most explicitly demonstrated by the national 'Closing the Gap' framework in which Australian governments pledged



to close gaps in Indigenous life expectancy, Indigenous childhood mortality rates, and Indigenous educational and employment outcomes (COAG 2009, 2011); by the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) (Australian Government 2007); and, most recently, by the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014). Policy approaches such as 'Close the Gap' reduce deeply entrenched development problems to mere numbers and statistics – to the extent that policy goals become almost abstractions, divorced from the lived reality of Indigenous subjects (Altman & Fogarty 2010). Deficit discourses encourage policy makers to define success in narrow ways. There is little scope for incorporating Indigenous aspirations into policy when policy success is defined primarily in terms of statistical parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

In summary two broad influences come together to impact upon the development of contemporary Indigenous education policy in Australia. Firstly, neo-liberal approaches to education privilege the market and 'empty out' notions of difference in favour of globalising hegemonies and testing regimes. Secondly, we see that the broader arena of Indigenous affairs has become increasingly preoccupied with statistical equality and a race to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Collectively, these two influences set the scene for educational reforms that discount local and Indigenous perspectives on educational success. Indeed they preclude the questioning of the system itself. As Gunther and his co-authors ask:

*Increasingly, the system is becoming nationalised, with national approaches to testing, professional standards for teachers and curriculum. Seldom is the system itself interrogated or tested to see whether it works. It is a given. But what if the education system was itself flawed in its response to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families? (Guenther et al. 2013: 101)*

3

The ABS acknowledges that this number is an approximation due to evidence of undercounts in Indigenous statistics.

## INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA'S NORTHERN TERRITORY

There are approximately 168,803 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia, characterised by geographic, socio-economic and cultural diversity (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2014).<sup>3</sup> Indigenous education in Australia has been defined by sharp political contestation (Calma 2009) and has typically oscillated between the pursuit of local cultural imperatives through self-determined development, and the pursuit of statistical parity through the replication of 'normal' education practices and structures (Fogarty 2013; Rowse 2002). Educational success has been further confounded by an unresolved historical legacy of institutionalized racism and the legacy of systemic underfunding of Indigenous education (Fogarty 2012).

In the NT, attempts to improve Indigenous education have been marred by bitter disputes over alternative pedagogic approaches, and by the stultifying effect of an ongoing and pervasive discourse of policy 'failure' (Simpson et al. 2009). The NT also has a demographic and geographic profile that creates unique educational challenges. 75 per cent of the NT's Indigenous population reside in remote communities and this population is spread across an area of 1 346 200 square kilometres. There are 985

4. While demonstrating that structural disadvantage does effect educational outcomes regardless of context, we are certainly not conflating the specific and unique challenges of remote Indigenous Australia with 'everywhere' else.

discrete Indigenous communities in the NT with a total of 185 schools (154 public and 32 private schools). 80 of these schools are to be found in very remote areas, and 40 of these schools have less than 4 teachers. The challenge of community isolation and distance from metropolitan centres is exacerbated by entrenched intergenerational socio-economic disadvantage. These structural factors - which could be called the social determinants of educational achievement - are well documented in the international scholarship for having a detrimental effect on student educational outcomes, regardless of the ethnicity of students or the educational approach used (OECD 2002).<sup>4</sup> Developing effective educational programs in such contexts is certainly not easy.

Standard measures of Indigenous educational attainment in Northern Territory schools paint a grim picture. As shown in Figures II and III, standardized scores from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and figures on school attendance in remote parts of the NT show that students in remote parts of the NT are not performing anywhere near equivalent levels obtained by their non-Indigenous peers in other parts of Australia.

*Figure II  
NAPLAN data  
by Geolocation,  
Indigeneity, Year  
Level and NAPLAN  
Domain, comparing  
Northern Territory with  
the rest of Australia  
(Wilson 2014: 55)*

Geolocation	Indigenous Status	Year Level	Domain				
			Reading	Writing	Spelling	G&P	Numeracy
Provincial	Indigenous	3	-22	-32	-26	-21	-16
		5	-16	-23	-17	-18	-12
		7	-20	-22	-24	-26	-19
		9	-19	-28	-30	-34	-18
Remote	Indigenous	3	-28	-45	-30	-24	-20
		5	-9	-18	-15	-12	-7
		7	-36	-66	-30	-42	-23
		9	-23	-53	-38	-42	-20
Very remote	Indigenous	3	-63	-92	-80	-77	-47
		5	-62	-103	-107	-74	-43
		7	-77	-124	-120	-112	-46
		9	-67	-125	-109	-96	-47
Provincial	Non-Indigenous	3	-16	-17	-11	-17	-10
		5	-6	-7	-2	-4	-6
		7	-6	-5	-5	-7	-10
		9	2	4	-1	-1	-1
Remote	Non-Indigenous	3	10	-14	7	9	11
		5	10	7	9	12	9
		7	12	-4	9	10	6
		9	13	2	4	18	12
Very remote	Non-Indigenous	3	-3	-6	-5	-1	1
		5	12	-5	2	11	12
		7	26	-6	13	22	16
		9	19	1	-5	34	30

**Figure III**  
Average Enrolment and Attendance by remoteness and region in the Northern Territory, Term 1 2014 (Department of Education 2014)

		Indigenous			Non-Indigenous			Total		
		Enrolment	Absent Rate	Absent Number	Enrolment	Absent Rate	Absent Number	Enrolment	Absent Rate	Absent Number
Early Years	Mobile Preschool	93	83.4%	78	9	80.2%	7	102	85.1%	85
	Preschool	934	87.8%	823	1,783	88.7%	1581	2717	81.8%	2212
	Kindergarten	14	85.4%	9	27	89.2%	24	41	82.2%	34
	Transition	1,213	70.5%	856	1,596	91.4%	1458	2809	82.1%	2388
	Year 1	1,234	72.5%	895	1,809	91.2%	1523	2994	83.3%	2419
Primary Years	Year 2	1,211	74.7%	909	1,506	92.8%	1394	2816	84.3%	2373
	Year 3	1,281	74.5%	949	1,453	93.0%	1351	2734	84.4%	2292
	Year 4	1,281	75.1%	948	1,519	93.4%	1232	2780	84.4%	2178
	Year 5	1,177	75.9%	894	1,327	93.8%	1241	2505	85.2%	2135
	Year 6	1,304	74.8%	1021	1,293	93.8%	1215	2597	84.1%	2236
Middle Years	Year 7	1,183	78.3%	888	827	93.1%	802	2090	86.0%	1790
	Year 8	1,263	70.3%	747	1,036	91.4%	945	2308	83.4%	1751
	Year 9	895	68.8%	616	1,087	91.1%	983	1982	83.5%	1629
Senior Years	Year 10	808	65.1%	527	1,131	88.1%	1008	1940	81.4%	1575
	Year 11	718	68.4%	470	1,245	88.8%	1103	1963	82.0%	1615
	Year 12	410	87.7%	277	1,060	92.1%	980	1474	87.0%	1282
Upgraded Secondary		1	43.3%	0	78	94.8%	74	79	94.1%	74
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>15028</b>	<b>71.7%</b>	<b>10774</b>	<b>18521</b>	<b>91.4%</b>	<b>16828</b>	<b>33549</b>	<b>81.8%</b>	<b>28898</b>

However, while NAPLAN and attendance results tell us something about how students are performing, they are far from the full story and must be seen as only one measure of teaching and learning effectiveness (Sarra 2011). Simple comparative measures have come to dominate political debates about remote Indigenous education, with the NAPLAN test becoming so influential that the Australian Senate recently conducted a parliamentary inquiry into its effectiveness (Commonwealth of Australia 2013). Introduced in 2008, the NAPLAN test is taken by Australian students enrolled in grades three, five, seven and nine. It tests student outcomes in four domains: reading; writing; language conventions such as spelling, grammar and punctuation; and numeracy (ACARA 2011). The Senate inquiry quoted a number of submissions outlining the unintended and negative consequences of the NAPLAN testing regime including a narrowing of the curriculum or ‘teaching to the test’, and the creation of a NAPLAN preparation industry which compounds the perception that NAPLAN is a ‘high stakes’ test (Commonwealth of Australia 2013). The high dependence on NAPLAN as a tool for policymaking means that current educational policy is unable to recognize and respond to the complex socio-cultural determinants of educational performance or to incorporate local educational aspirations. Rather, the political imperative to address statistical disparities in educational provision appears to be driving ever more desperate and draconian policy solutions. At the federal level, for instance, legislation has been developed to strengthen truancy powers, force children to school and link parents’ social security payments to their children’s school attendance record (Commonwealth of Australia 2014).

Such approaches are at odds with educational research which shows that positive educational outcomes occur when training and educational development is appropriately linked with communities’ needs and development goals (Catts & Gelade 2002; McRae et al. 2000; Miller 2005). One major study, for instance, found positive outcomes for Indigenous education relied on a range of factors including: community ownership and involvement; the incorporation of Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values; the establishment of strong partnerships with communities; the capacity to be flexible regarding course design, content and delivery; the quality of staff; and the availability of extensive student support services (Miller 2005: 18). The literature is also unequivocal in stating that Indigenous knowledge and local development aspirations must form a central component of educational and pedagogic design (Altman & Fogarty 2010; Anderson 2003; Fogarty & Schwab 2012; Fordham et al. 2010; Henry et al. 1999; Kral 2010; O’Callaghan 2005; Schwab 2006).

Similarly, the influence of student, teacher and systemic perceptions of intelligence and cognitive ability have long been noted as having influence on education outcomes. This has a tradition in the theory of the 'self-fulfilling prophesy', where if the student is told they are poor at school, they will then achieve poorly at school (Merton 1948). Seminal texts by Nakata (2007) and deliberate rejections of deficit by educators such as Sara (2011) have exposed and challenged education orthodoxies in the indigenous education field. Similarly, concurrent theoretical work such as *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity* (Bernstein 2000), argue that pedagogy develops its own discursive norms. These norms dictate what is made thinkable and unthinkable in relation to school knowledge positing and are key to examining power relations and the potential subjugation of a student's identity. Here we see a direct correlation between a discourse of deficit and the potentiality of educational outcomes and performance for Indigenous students. The use of a deliberate alternative discourse based in 'strength' rather than deficit is producing an emergent body of work and practice that challenges such hegemonic approaches to educational policy making (See Bamblett 2013; Gorringer & Spillman 2008; Guenther et al. 2013; Sarra 2011)

## **A SHARE IN THE FUTURE: THE WILSON REVIEW**

In May 2014, NT Minister for Education the Hon. Peter Chandler welcomed the findings of *A share in the future*, a review of Indigenous education in the NT led by independent consultant Bruce Wilson. In his announcement of the final report, Minister Chandler (2014) pointed to the need for a 'new, evidence-based approach' to education in the NT citing declining educational outcomes and the failure of efforts to improve results in remote schools. Some recommendations of the review, such as the extension of the *Families as First Teachers* program to involve parents of pre-school children in education, are uncontroversial and will be universally welcomed. Similarly, the recommendations on workforce planning for Indigenous education workers is a major step forward and long overdue. However other recommendations, such as the plan to collaborate with Noel Pearson's Cape York Institute on direct instruction curriculums, and the proposal to shift the delivery of most senior and middle years schooling solely exclusively to urban schools are much more contentious. The NT Government has already committed 40.5 million dollars of funding to this second contentious recommendation, with the plan to build residential facilities in urban centres to accommodate senior students from remote Indigenous communities (Chandler 2014).

A closer look at this recommendation shows that the closure of high schools in remote areas is positioned as a logical response to the lower educational achievements of remote schools. The recommendation clearly demonstrates little awareness of the complex history behind Indigenous education in the NT. For instance, the *Bringing Them Home* report, a major inquiry in to the effects of removing Aboriginal children from their families, explicitly documented the dislocation, and the emotional toll that resulted from lack of education opportunities in Indigenous communities and the necessity of sending Indigenous students away to boarding schools (HREOC 1997: 485-91). In fact, if students were required to enrol in schools hundreds of kilometres away from home and family, past practices tell us very strongly that such an approach will lead to lower enrolments and poor retention defeating the stated purpose of the report.

The closure of schools also appears precipitous. In most of the communities targeted for school closures, secondary education has only been provided for the last ten years and these schools have been substantially underfunded compared to schools in locations such as the territory capital Darwin (Taylor 2009). While remote locations certainly pose unique logistical and financial challenges for both schools and the NT Education department, the remoteness of these high schools is not sufficient reason to close them, nor are poor outcomes over what amounts to a very short time to address an intergenerational project, a reason to dis-invest in education.

## **ANALYSIS: ASSUMPTIONS OF THE WILSON REVIEW**

The analysis below focuses on unpacking the assumptions behind education policy in the NT including the way that the NT Education Review defines problems and renders them into technical terms. Our approach in this section recognizes that the process of ‘problematism’ is often intertwined with a practice of translating problems into a closed ‘technical domain’ (Li 2007: 7-12). Whereas the process of problematisation involves the identification of ‘deficiencies that need to be rectified’, the practice of ‘rendering technical’ involves translating political problems into the apparently neutral languages of social science and public policy (Li 2007: 7, 10-11). Once recast into technical language, a policy problem becomes the subject of ‘calculated programs’ for the realization of particular policy goals rather than a subject for democratic deliberation and negotiation (Li 2007: 12). The analysis below shows that the assumptions underpinning the Review have the effect of depoliticising remote schooling and to position the issue as a set of technical challenges that require technical solutions, rather than an issue that requires ongoing political negotiation and consensus-building.

This process of de-politicisation occurs in several ways. First, it occurs by defining educational success according to narrow, quantitative measures. These measures are defined unilaterally by the author of the NT Review and precludes alternative conceptions of educational success. Second, the review develops a standardised and generic understanding of Indigenous communities and students which focuses on their deficiencies, especially the inability of students to be successful according to the narrow definition of success adopted by the report. Statistical and demographic forms of knowledge are privileged over knowledge derived from the culture, traditions, values and history of Aboriginal people, and the involvement of school communities is positioned as unnecessary, unless those communities are willing to work within the confines of a preconceived model of educational success. Our analyses of the recommendations of the report shows that - having redefined educational policy as a technical, bureaucratic process - the review proposes a number of recommendations that further restrict the autonomy of schools and their ability to adapt their activities to fit the educational needs of remote Indigenous students and their communities.

## MEASURING SUCCESS? NAPLAN AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE METRICS

The NT Education Review defines educational success in narrow terms, with a primary focus on boosting performance of Indigenous children on standardized tests for literacy and numeracy. This narrow definition is partly a product of Wilson's 'vigorously pragmatic' attempt to prioritise scarce resources (Wilson 2014: 35). However, it also stems from Wilson's explicit commitment to a 'western' educational system and his belief that strong literacy and numeracy skills are required to succeed in this system (Wilson 2014: 35). His approach suggests that broader—or more nuanced—conceptions of educational success are an unaffordable luxury, and that the need for a strict focus on literacy and numeracy is both self-evident and non-negotiable.

NAPLAN is the chief measure used by the review to assess the educational performance of NT schools. Wilson uses NAPLAN data to compare the results of students from the NT and other Australian states and territories. This data is disaggregated by both the Indigenous status of students and whether they reside in provincial, remote or very remote regions. The analysis demonstrates that non-Indigenous NT students from provincial areas such as Darwin or Palmerston are slightly behind non-Indigenous students from elsewhere in Australia, while non-Indigenous students in other areas of the NT are slightly ahead of non-Indigenous students outside of the Territory. Indigenous students are the equivalent of a few months behind their Indigenous counterparts in provincial and remote areas. The 'largest gaps' in educational outcomes are for Indigenous students located in very remote areas who by grade nine are about five years behind very remote Indigenous students in the rest of Australia (Wilson 2014: 54-5). This is a level that, Wilson points out, would 'normally be seen only in third world countries' (Wilson 2014: 55).

The review uses educational performance—as represented by NAPLAN scores for each school—in conjunction with other statistical measures to classify schools into either high or low performing systems (Wilson 2014: 58-9). These statistical measures include: remoteness of the school; socio-economic status of school communities according to the Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA) score; enrolment numbers and attendance rates during the 2013 school year; an indicator of developmental vulnerability of children, measured using the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) for 2013; and the proportion of students who speak a language other than English at home (Wilson 2014: 48-50). Most remote schools are classified as Priority 1 schools, which means that these schools are low-performing systems and will require a higher commitment of public funding to improve attendance rates and NAPLAN results. Priority 2 and 3 schools are typically the better performing schools and are mostly located in regional and provincial centres (Wilson 2014: 58-60). The classification of schools is closely correlated with the demographic and geographic context in which schools are situated, meaning that Priority 1 schools have little prospect of becoming Priority 3 schools in the future.

Measuring school success in this way is an impediment to broader discussions about the purpose of the schooling system in remote and regional areas of the NT. It assumes that high literacy and numeracy rates are the primary objective of the schooling system and that NAPLAN is an accurate measure of these abilities. The report explicitly rejects discussion of other educational objectives:

*It is ... important to acknowledge from the outset that this review has made a pragmatic decision to focus on the skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system. Some people will find this a challenging position. The review has taken as a non-negotiable that there must be an explicit focus on improving unacceptably low outcomes for Indigenous children and that this will not be achieved unless there is rigorous and relentless attention to learning English and gaining the skills that support participation in a modern democracy and economy (Wilson 2014: 35).*

This approach denies the possibility of developing more nuanced conceptions of educational success. It disregards both the views of school communities—since remote area schools will, if recommendations are adopted, have less autonomy to respond to community priorities—and the broader research literature on Indigenous education and community development (Fogarty & Dodson 2014; Grimes 2014). The Review also shows little awareness of the criticisms that have been levelled at standardized testing regimes, such as NAPLAN, as an effective or desirable measure of student learning. As well as those critiques mentioned earlier, research has shown that NAPLAN is both linguistically and culturally problematic for Indigenous children, especially those in remote areas (Wigglesworth et al. 2011: 340). This casts doubt on whether NAPLAN is an appropriate measure of school outcomes in remote NT schools.

## **‘VULNERABLE’ CHILDREN AND THE EXCLUSION OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATIONAL VALUES**

Descriptions of Aboriginal deficit pervade the NT Education Review, with this type of representation used to describe both Indigenous children in remote areas and the communities in which they live. The NT Education Review positions Indigenous children as ‘vulnerable’ to a range of factors that are known to increase the risk of poor educational outcomes. The vulnerability of Indigenous students is a key premise of the report, and is central to discussions of the policy problem that the Review has been set up to address. Chapters two and three of the report, for instance, focus on outlining the adversity and disadvantage of Indigenous students and on clarifying how the circumstances of remote Indigenous communities place limits on the reach and impact of the schooling system (Wilson 2014: 36-46). Many factors are listed as limitations on the NT Educational department including: family stress; poor nutrition; rates of infection; drug and alcohol use, including prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder among Indigenous children; the birth-rate, incidences of pregnancy complications, rates of smoking during pregnancy, birth weights, and rates of child mortality; child nutrition, malnutrition and obesity rates; issues of hearing loss; measures of housing quality and extent of overcrowding; suicide rates; and so on (Wilson 2014: 37-9). AEDI findings, which were mentioned earlier as an indexed measure of childhood development, were used to demonstrate that 59.2 per cent of Indigenous children in the NT can be classified as ‘developmentally vulnerable’ on at least one of five ‘domains’ measured, compared to 22 per cent of children nationally. This means that these young children might have trouble in the transition to school or that they might need special educational support (Wilson 2014: 38-9, 90-3).

This statistical scrutiny is extended to Indigenous communities more broadly, with these communities represented in terms of their levels of disadvantage and the extent to which they differ from wider Australian norms. For instance, the chapter on

demographics collates data from diverse statistical sources to summarise Aboriginal income levels, language and mobility (Wilson 2014: 41-6). This chapter shows that Indigenous people in the NT are increasingly concentrated in very remote locations and that, in comparison with non-Indigenous people, are more likely to come from more densely populated houses, are less wealthy, are more likely to be unemployed, and are much less likely to have attended school beyond year ten (Wilson 2014: 42-5). Continuing with the rhetoric of Aboriginal deficit, the review identifies language as a factor impeding educational success, with a thirty five per cent minority of Indigenous people speaking English at home and thirteen per cent of Indigenous people not able to speak English well or at all (Wilson 2014: 44).

The use of statistics as the primary mode of representing Indigenous students and their communities results in Indigenous people being depicted in ways which highlight their differences from the broader Australian community along generic statistical indicators. One implication of this approach is that the values, history and culture of relevant Aboriginal communities are largely absent from the report and have little impact on the review's recommendations. Where Aboriginal culture or priorities are mentioned in the report, this occurs in forms that are both generic in tone and heavily qualified. For instance, take the following passage from the chapter on community engagement:

*All schools should be sensitive to their cultural contexts, and should seek to reflect local culture in their physical and educational environments. This is a minimal expectation of any school; that it should feel to students like a place that respects and takes seriously their culture, background and experience. (Wilson 2014: 85).*

This passage reflects the view that cultural sensitivity is a minimal requirement for schools, but falls well short of any suggestion that remote schools with majority Aboriginal student populations might require a different level of engagement with cultural norms than that required by any typical Australian school. The approach suggests a basic aversion to the idea that the purpose or activities of Aboriginal schools might differ in any substantive way from that of any other Australian school.

The review tacitly ranks Aboriginal cultural practices according to their potential to contribute to educational success. Following directly on from the quote above, this next excerpt illustrates how Aboriginal culture is understood in primarily functional terms throughout the review:

*Cultural inclusiveness also has a key purpose in enhancing the effectiveness of schools in teaching students and gaining the support and participation of parents and the community. The review does not, however, support the view, articulated by some respondents [to the draft review report], that schools should be a source of cultural maintenance, or that schools in remote communities should have fundamentally different purposes from those in other parts of the NT or Australia. Cultural competence should assist, not deflect schools from, their core purposes (Wilson 2014: 85).*

This passage suggests that Aboriginal culture need only be taken into consideration in two respects: first, where cultural norms or common behaviours might act as an impediment to educational success, as defined by authorities; and, second, where Aboriginal involvement or cultural activities can be used as a strategy for increasing student involvement in school activities, or increasing student compliance with the education department's objectives.



On balance, Aboriginal culture is more likely to be portrayed as an impediment to education than as an enabling factor. For instance, community-based activities are viewed as one of the factors decreasing student school attendance (Wilson 2014: 25). Two recommendations of the review seek to address this problem, even though little evidence is provided in support of the claim that community events form a substantial impediment to student educational success. Recommendation 35c suggests that the education department ‘analyse the attendance effect of the range of community activities and initiatives (including football carnivals, rodeos, shows, royalty payments and service policies in community shops) and negotiate to achieve modifications that will reduce the negative effect on attendance of these community activities’ (Wilson 2014: 25). Recommendation 35d proposes that the department ‘include in community engagement activities discussions with communities to determine whether communities are prepared to consider the timing and the extent of student participation in some activities to assist in the improvement of attendance and student outcomes’ (Wilson 2014: 25). One interpretation of these recommendations is that Aboriginal practices are assumed to be an impediment to the achievement of educational success, unless there is good evidence to the contrary. Community engagement also appears to be viewed primarily as a tool for persuading adult community members to support predefined government goals for local schools and students. This attitude is demonstrated in the recommendation above, where community members are asked if they are prepared to alter child involvement in community activities, and also later in the report during the discussion of the possible establishment of new Child and Family Centres in remote locations. There, the review recommends that a ‘local steering committee be established with community representation to *ensure local input and support for the initiative*’ (emphasis added) (Wilson 2014: 39).

Community engagement is therefore constructed in quite minimalist terms that preclude substantive Aboriginal contribution to either school governance or to the development of educational goals. A narrative of Aboriginal deficiency pervades the report, contributing to the invisibility of Aboriginal priorities and the problematisation of Aboriginal cultural and community activities.

## TECHNOLOGIES OF REFORM: INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY AND STANDARDISING EDUCATION

The review is consistent with the broader global trend toward generic pedagogic approaches in a number of ways, which we outline below. These developments have the highest impact on remote Indigenous communities since schools in these communities are the target of higher levels of bureaucratic oversight and intervention than other NT schools.

As a casualty of the ubiquitous ‘audit culture’ (Strathern 2000; Sullivan 2009) that currently pervades Australian bureaucracies, the education review demonstrates an implicit faith in the idea that better surveillance of the many ‘parts’ that make up the education system will translate into better policy outcomes in the future. More than one fifth of the review’s recommendations identify areas in which schools and the education department ought to either generate more data, increase benchmarking practices or increase reporting requirements. Eight of a total of 51 recommendations relate to expanding monitoring practices or the evaluation of proposed program

initiatives. This conflation of the capacity to measure with the capacity to govern has a number of implications in its own right—including resourcing implications for cash-strapped schools if they are required to generate additional reports—but it is also consistent with the review’s broader focus on increasing accountability of schools to the education department and greater standardization of educational approaches within remote NT schools.

Remote schools are particularly targeted in the review, with the expectation that the education department would increase accountability for low-performing schools while loosening control over high-performing schools. As discussed previously, the review classifies schools into three levels of priority based on a range of statistical indicators. Priority 1 schools are seen as low-performing and are mostly remote, Indigenous schools. Priority 2 and 3 schools are mostly located in regional or provincial centres and typically perform better against statistical measures of schooling success. In the chapter on School Categories, Wilson argues that Priority 1 schools are ‘dealing with a variety of factors of disadvantage’ and will ‘require resources targeted to addressing those issues’ (Wilson 2014: 52). However, he then argues that improving school outcomes is not just a matter of resources and draws on a study by Mourshed et al (2010) to outline some general principles for deciding levels of autonomy for high and low performing schools:

*For the purposes of this review, the key finding in the [Mourshed] report concerned the distinction between reform approaches found to be effective in low- and high-performing systems. In summary, poor performing systems (which would include the Priority 1 schools listed in Appendix 6) do best when they tighten control and provide technical training...By contrast, high performing systems (including the Priority 3 schools in the NT) are best improved by a loosening of central control, a reliance on evidence-informed school-based practice, teacher collaboration and standard-setting, and a gradual movement from the sole use of common standardized assessments to the inclusion of school and teacher self-evaluation. (Wilson 2014: 59)*

This principle gives the greatest autonomy to schools in regional and provincial centres, and least to schools that serve remote Indigenous communities.

The principle is given effect in many recommendations of the review. Recommendations often distinguish between Priority 1 schools, where programs are described as mandated or required, and other schools which would have greater autonomy over school governance. Recommendation 21 is one of the more controversial examples of this approach since it relates to the mandated introduction of explicit or direct instruction techniques in NT schools. This recommendation argues that the department should:

21. Give priority to ensuring that all Indigenous children gain English literacy by progressively mandating approaches to early literacy and assessment in Priority 1 schools, including:

a. mandating a phonological and phonemic awareness teaching program and assessment instruments for all students at school entry, along with sight word, phonics and spelling programs;

- b. undertaking further evaluation of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy model of Direct Instruction with a view to implementing the program, initially in literacy, in one or two clusters of 3-5 remote schools each including one larger hub school; ...
- e. following the implementation of the initial literacy program, evaluating the need for commonly used programs related to vocabulary, fluency and comprehension in Priority 1 schools to ensure a balanced literacy curriculum;
- f. encouraging town schools, especially those with high Indigenous populations, to use programs mandated for Priority 1 schools... (Wilson 2014: 132)

Mandating the adoption of particular programs such as Direct Instruction in Priority 1 schools increases central departmental control of schools in remote areas. It also decreases the ability of local teaching staff to respond to the particular circumstances of remote communities, or to implement programs that might accord with local parent and community values and learning preferences.

One other controversial recommendation of the review—to close high schools in remote areas—only applies to Priority 1 schools, and is flagged in this analysis as a proposal that is likely to face staunch opposition from educators and remote communities alike. Framed as a response to the ‘limited success’ of secondary schooling in remote communities, the education review proposes that ‘secondary education for remote and very remote students should progressively be provided in urban schools ... with students accommodated in residential facilities’ (Wilson 2014: 22). In keeping with the minimalist approach towards community engagement found in the rest of the report, the recommendations on high school provision suggest that local communities be consulted on how long the middle years of schooling will be continued to be provided in their local school, though with ‘the expectation that within five years most students from these schools will attend urban schools from at least Year 9 onwards’ (Wilson 2014: 158).

In summary, the recommendations of the report align with both international trends in education and domestic paradigms of Indigenous governance, as highlighted earlier in this article. The push towards Direct Instruction techniques plays into several wider neoliberal educational trends, including advocacy for generic pedagogic approaches and the de-pedagogising and de-professionalisation of teachers. Reforms of this type are seen as a technique for achieving educational success. However, educators and parents may not find these teaching practices—or the conceptions of educational success that they are based on—to be acceptable. The case against middle and secondary schooling in remote communities depends on narrow indicators of educational success, and contributes to a pervasive narrative of ‘crisis’ and ‘failure’ in Indigenous Affairs policy. With a tendency to render political problems into ‘technical’ ones—and to look for immediate fixes to complex problems—Australian approaches to Indigenous issues often run the risk of being both simplistic in design and non-inclusive (even authoritarian) during implementation. Unfortunately, the latest education review in the NT is not immune from these influences, and favours a simplistic notion of statistical parity over the development of nuanced conceptions of educational success.

## CONCLUSION

In the rush to attain statistical equity and to 'fix' the Indigenous education problem in remote parts of the Northern Territory in Australia, it seems that policy responses are increasingly divorced from the lived reality of Aboriginal people in the bush. As we have shown, globalising movements towards increasingly hegemonic pedagogic approaches have combined with broader Indigenous affairs policy aimed at ameliorating the deficit between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. The combination of these broad influences is enabling policy that is disenfranchising and silencing a diversity of pedagogic approaches and Indigenous voices in the field of Indigenous Education. Instead, the complex structural conditions that combine to create educational challenges in remote Australia are being 'rendered technical' and subjected to technologies of government looking for drastic solutions. This is exemplified in the approaches advocated in 'A share in the future' the Northern Territory Government's review of Indigenous education.

We want to finish this paper by challenging the normative assumptions that creating statistical parity requires 'mainstream' educational solutions. Rather we ask, how can policy approaches better accommodate a range of educational aspirations in remote Australia? What might an approach to education that allows for pluralism and diversity in language, culture and location actually look like? What space might there be for alternative approaches such as red dirt thinking or 'learning on Country'? And how might remote Indigenous Australians have a greater voice and be enabled to challenge the deficit discourse that is permeating discussions about their development futures? A starting point might perhaps be to take a view of what is possible beyond the next review.

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## ART PIECE

*Gungura – the  
Spiralling Wind*  
Samuel Namundja

*Courtesy of the artist*



## SAMUEL NAMUNDJA

Born : 1965 Language : Kuninjku Moiety : Yirridjja Country : Mankorlod

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Samuel Namundja was born in West Central Arnhem Land in 1965. A member of an artistic family, Samuel was taught to paint the stories of his clan by his father, Peter Marralwanga, himself a distinguished painter.

Still in his 20s, Namundja won the Rothmans Foundation Award for Best Painting in a Traditional Media at the National Aboriginal Art Award in 1993. He followed up a high commendation in 2003 by winning the Telstra Bark Painting Award at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2006.

Samuel held his first solo exhibition at Niagara Galleries in 2004, but has participated in more than 30 important group exhibitions as far afield as Slovenia, Japan, France, UK and USA since 1988. In addition to being a regular finalist in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, he was also shown in the important cross-cultural Living Together is Easy a joint exhibition at the Contemporary Art Centre, Japan and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. His work was also included in the seminal Crossing Country exhibition curated by Hetti Perkins at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

A common theme of Samuel Namunjaja's work is the gungura or wind dreaming. These paintings depict not only the spiralling winds and cyclones common in Arnhem Land, but also refer to Bilwoyinj, a site near Samuel's clan estate. At this place, it is said that a father and son, important creation beings known as na-korrkko in the Kuninjku language group, hunted and ate a goanna, leaving behind some of the fat which became the rock salt that can be found at the site today. Bilwoyinj is also the ceremonial ground for Yabbaduruwa, a major ceremony which is concerned with matters of initiation, land ownership and the cycles of regeneration of man and nature. Other favourite subjects are the mimi spirit figures, Ngalyod rainbow serpent and the Namarrkon lightning man. Like many younger artists, Namunjaja paints not only these traditional stories, but also looks to less sacred surroundings and everyday activities such as fishing for yabbies, and other animals and plants.

Namunjaja produces a particularly fine style of rarrk typical of the best Western Arnhem Land painters. He is recognised by many as a potential successor to the pre-eminent painter of the area, John Mawurndjul. The detailed application of the ochre creates a delicate and lyrical surface. There is movement, life and depth in the work. The importance of the younger artists who continue the rich tradition of the fine rarrk cannot be underrated. Namunjaja's exceptional talent and creative application to his work will ensure a long career.

## ART WORK

### Gungura – the Spiralling Wind

Samuel Namunjaja has painted 'gungura', the spiralling wind associated with several sites in the Kardbam clan. On one level, this painting can be interpreted as a depiction of the kinds of mini-cyclones common during the wet season in Arnhem Land, where the artist lives. In this painting, gungura also relates specifically to a site called Bilwoyinj, near Mankorlod, on Samuel Namunjaja's clan estate. At this site, two of the most important Kuninjku creation beings, a father and son known as na-korrkko, are believed to have hunted and eaten a goanna. They left some of the goanna fat behind at the site, which turned into the rock that still stands there today. The word Bilwoyinj, which is the name of this site, also refers to the fat of the goanna. Bilwoyinj site is also a ceremonial ground for a ceremony called Yabbaduruwa, a major ceremony owned by the Yirridja patrimoiety. The Yabbaduruwa ceremony is primarily concerned with initiation, land ownership and promoting the cyclical regeneration of the human and natural worlds.