RED DIRT THINKING ON REMOTE EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGE

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ABSTRACT

The discourse of remote education is often characterised by a rhetoric of disadvantage. This is reflected in statistics that on the surface seem unambiguous in their demonstration of poor outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A range of data support this view, including National Assessment Program--Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) achievement data, school attendance data, Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data and other compilations such as the Productivity Commission's biennial *Overcoming Disadvantage* Report. These data, briefly summarised in this paper, paint a bleak picture of the state of education in remote Australia and are at least in part responsible for a number of government initiatives (state, territory and Commonwealth) designed to 'close the gap'.

However, for all the rhetoric about disadvantage and the emphasis in strategic policy terms about activities designed to 'close the gap', the results of the numerous programs seem to suggest that the progress, as measured in the data, is too slow to make any significant difference to the apparent disparity between remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools and those in the broader community. We are left with a discourse that is replete with illustrations of poor outcomes and failures and does little to acknowledge the richness, diversity and achievement of those living in remote Australia.

This paper critiques the binaries of 'disadvantage' and 'advantage' as they are articulated in policy and consequently reported in data. Its purpose is to propose alternative ways of thinking about remote educational disadvantage, based on data from a five year Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation project. It asks, how might 'relative advantage' be defined if the ontologies, axiologies, epistemologies and cosmologies of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families were more fully taken into account in the education system's discourse within/of remote schooling. Based on what we have termed 'red dirt thinking' it goes on to propose alternative measures of success that could be applied in remote contexts where ways of knowing, being, doing, believing and valuing often differ considerably from what the educational system imposes on it.

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INTRODUCTION

Over recent years Australia's education system has undergone a series of reforms. These reforms have tended to nationalise the education system such that now there is a national curriculum, national professional standards for teachers, national testing regimes and national agreements and partnerships. There are good arguments for these reforms—for example the transferability of standards, qualifications and content across state boundaries. Like many other industrialised countries, Australia is concerned about maintaining its place in the world. Its economic development is underpinned by attempts to build a 'world-class' education system that produces results among the best in the world (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012b). There have recently been concerns that Australia's standing among developed nations is slipping and that outcomes represented in standardised tests are not keeping pace, particularly with emerging economies in Asia (Jensen, 2012). One reason for this slippage is the relatively 'low performance' (Thomson et al., 2011, p. 299) and 'poor results' (Johns, 2006, p. 9) from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and more particularly those from remote geographical locations across the nation.

Much of the focus of the reform process has been on addressing standards so that students who belong to socio-economically disadvantaged groups have similar opportunities to gain advantage from the education system. There has been much discussion in Australia about the appropriateness of educational tests such as *National Assessment Program --Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) and other measures that are used to indicate educational success and failure, but the contrast between the results for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and others, stands out. It would seem that the word 'disadvantage' properly describes what appears in the comparative statistics. This word is used both to describe the disparity between indicators of success and to describe the consequent policy response—'overcoming disadvantage'. The disparity, sometimes referred to as 'the gap' then needs to be closed in order to overcome the disadvantage.

The discourse of disadvantage is apparently based on the empirical evidence. Regular data collections such as school-based tests, Census data, measures of progress and an array of other measures, confirm that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are failing. Further, 'they' fail more in very remote contexts than they do in urban or regional contexts. What is more, on some measures the 'gap' is widening, despite the effort put into closing it. While the discourse is not unique to the remote context (Vass, 2012), it is accentuated in remote Australia. A task of this paper is firstly to define educational disadvantage and then to demonstrate how it is represented, and indeed contested.

This paper is prompted by research being conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation in its Remote Education Systems project. The authors are in the early stages of data collection, working across a number of sites in remote parts of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The focus of the research is on how to improve educational outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is within this context that we have been confronted by a prevailing discourse that on the one hand provides a long list of problems and issues framed around the deficits and disadvantages associated with remote education, and on the other, is short on solutions. The authors believe that it is time to revisit the assumptions behind the various deficit discourses and frame a new way of thinking, grounded in the reality of the ubiquitous 'red dirt' of remote Australia.

Ultimately, the purpose of the paper is to provide a frame of reference that is based outside the education system. The intent is to provide a theoretical and philosophical understanding of why the education system promotes particular measures of success and advantage. This will help the reader to understand why the discourse of disadvantage as it relates to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, prevails. It will hopefully also prompt an examination of what a new discourse that promotes advantage for those living in remote communities of Australia, might sound like.

INTRODUCING RED DIRT THINKING

When we think of innovation, we have come to know the concept of 'blue sky' thinking where we are able to dream about what might be possible without limitation or constraint, to let our ideas loose into the realms of possibility. As researchers in the Remote Education Systems Project, in the

Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC REP), we commit to deep thinking and imagining as we conceptualise our collaborative research focus in remote Australia. This may be considered to be 'blue sky' thinking, but as we look to the pragmatic task of taking a first step, actioning the thinking, it is the red dirt beneath the feet that beckons an impression.

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

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

Defining educational disadvantage

There is no simple or single definition of educational disadvantage. Slee (2010) associates disadvantage with exclusion and inequality which in the context of schools can be reflected in a 'perverse reciprocity' (p. 102) of exerted choices where students are excluded on the basis of race or class. Education systems may exacerbate these inequalities. In the United States the process of 'tracking' students into schools on the basis of ability, which in turn tends to differentiate students on the basis of race and class, has resulted in widening gaps rather than narrowing gaps (Gamoran, 2010). In the context of the debate about tracking in the United States, Jeannie Oakes talks about 'disparities in opportunity' (Oakes, 2005, p. 225) which in turn leads to disparities in outcomes. Whether tracking itself is to blame is immaterial here. The point is that disadvantage is firstly associated with opportunity, access, exclusion and inequality, not with outcomes. Tormey (2010), speaking to the Irish educational context, argues that the term is 'inherently political' (p. 188), and 'that models of measuring educational disadvantage, and the policy targets that are related to them, are also centrally involved in obscuring the essentially political nature of educational disadvantage' (p.192). Smyth (2010) argues, based mainly on a discussion of the Australian context of social inclusion/exclusion that the voices of those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of social inclusion and yet who are marginalised are rarely heard:

> *The underlying tone behind the approach of governments is largely hortative and punitive, within a thinly veiled deficit and victim-blaming mentality. The emphasis is on the rhetoric and practices of 'targetology' and 'deliverology' and the notion that if we continue to measure things, then somehow situations will improve. (p. 125)*

In the process, Smyth argues that the objects of disadvantage are often blamed for their failure to aspire or their lack of motivation to achieve. Therefore interventions, particularly those designed *for* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are then designed to deal with the problem—the person who is disadvantaged—in a way that attempts to fit the person to the educational context. This is then done to remove 'obstacles to success' such as absenteeism and out of school support (O'Keefe et al., 2012) or improve 'school readiness' of individuals without a concomitant approach that improves readiness of schools and support services (McTurk et al., 2008). This should of course not deny the reality of general disadvantages many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face, whether they be related to health such as a higher propensity for middle ear infections (DiGiacomo et al., 2013) or trauma as the result of experiencing violence (Bath, 2011) but these are not necessarily educational disadvantages. The point is that perhaps 'the most disturbing impediment to success for the Indigenous child' is the 'Eurocentric' nature of the education system itself (Andersen, 2011, p. 96)

THE DISCOURSE OF REMOTE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

However, despite the broader recognition that 'disadvantage' as it is defined in the literature is complex and dependent on an array of factors, this complexity is often distilled into simplistic messages about disparity of outcomes, which are in turn measured by even more simplistic indicators of performance. (see for example Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011). In the policy context disadvantage has been defined specifically as 'The difference (or gap) in outcomes for Indigenous Australians when compared with non-Indigenous Australians' (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2012, p. xiv). The concept then extends to 'closing the gap' (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) in a general sense and in a more specific educational context (What Works: The Work Program, 2012).

Without doubt the data shows differences, but there are problems with the pervasive rhetoric of disadvantage. *First* there is a real risk that being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander *is* the disadvantage, in effect 'cultural dysfunction' (Cowlishaw, 2012, p. 412). *Second*, the deficit discourse is most frequently based on non-Indigenous understandings of advantage, and developing a sense of the 'Aboriginal problem' (Gorringe, 2011). *Third*, the racialised nature of disadvantage may lead to a promulgation of responses that lead to 'exceptionalism' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the basis of race (Langton, 2012)—that is, an exceptionalist view that comes with race categorisations segregates and therefore discriminates against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. *Fourth*, the disadvantage discourse may idealise the interests of the privileged, reinforcing a hegemony that in turn reinforces existing power dynamics in society and results in 'self-fulfilling prophecies' of the disadvantaged (Orlowski, 2011, p. 43).

Data used to support the discourse

We have chosen to present three of the many data sources that are used to support the discourse of disadvantage. There are of course many more data sets—qualitative and quantitative—that would point to similar conclusions.

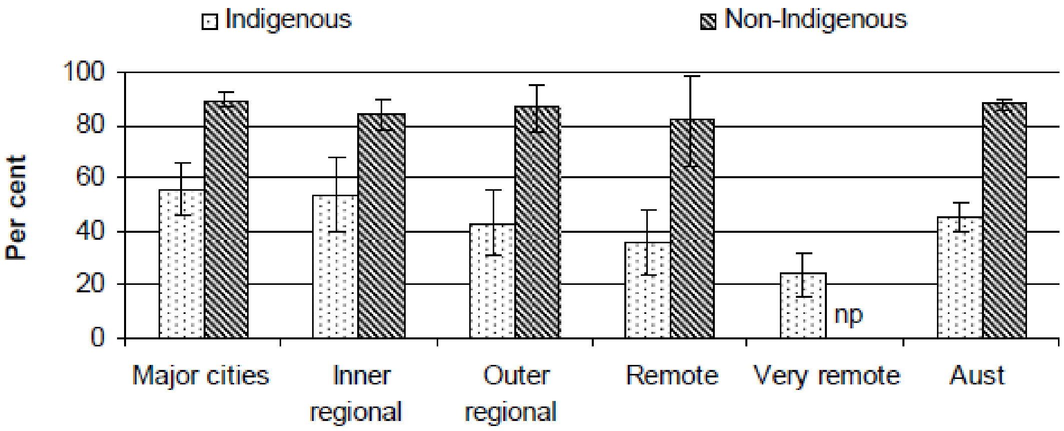
Overcoming disadvantage

The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report* (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011) points to a number of key indicators that represent the 'gap'. These are:

- Lower school attendance and enrolment rates;
- Poorer teacher quality (though no data are offered in the Report on this indicator);
- A lack of Indigenous Cultural Studies in school curricula (again no data to support this);
- Low levels of Year 9 attainment;
- Low levels of Year 10 attainment; and
- Difficulties in the transition from school to work.

The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report*, while not focused on remote disadvantage, highlights the larger gap for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Further, it makes links from education to other areas of disadvantage: health, employment, early childhood development, and the home environment. The Report paints what could be described as a very sad picture of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. A picture that on the whole (with the notable exceptions of mortality rates, home ownership, post-secondary outcomes, employment and income) does not appear to be getting much better. Again, the data should not be dismissed. It does have utility. To highlight one aspect of disadvantage, Figure 1, below demonstrates data used to show both the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and also the gap between cities and very remote parts of Australia.

Figure 1: ***Proportion of 20–24 year olds who had completed year 12 or certificate II or above, 2008***



Source: (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011, p. 22)

NAPLAN data

NAPLAN data confirms the educational outcome gap noted above, but particularly at school levels from years 3 to 9. The data shown in Table 1, below summarises our analysis of NAPLAN data for very remote schools with greater than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and national NAPLAN data available in the *NAPLAN Achievement in Reading, Persuasive Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy: National Report for 2012*. We show two domains—reading and numeracy—simply to highlight two major points. Not only do we see a disparity between the Australian data and that for very remote schools with greater than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but we also see the disparity, or 'the gap' tending to widen. While these data are of some concern in their own right, it is perhaps of more concern that they are part of 'an evidence base to support future policy reforms and system improvements including the aim of better directed resources.' (Standing Council on Federal Financial Relations, 2012, p. 8). We will return to this point later in the discussion.

Table 1: ***Analysis of average NAPLAN scores for very remote schools with >80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, compared with national data, 2008 to 2012***

	Very remote schools with >80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students		All Australian schools			
	Average score 2008-2012	2012	Average score 2008-2012	Average score 2012	Average 'gap' 2008-2012	2012 'gap'
Reading domain						
Year 3	239	238	412	419	173	181
Year 5	310	299	490	493	180	194
Year 7	390	384	542	541	152	157
Year 9	419	399	577	574	158	175
Numeracy						
Year 3	260	246	396	396	136	150
Year 5	350	343	489	486	139	143
Year 7	405	403	538	546	133	143
Year 9	451	452	584	585	133	133

Sources: (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012a, 2013)

Measuring Australia's Progress

The *Measures of Australia's Progress (MAP)* consultation paper (ABS, 2012a) acknowledges the significance of the rights of Indigenous peoples globally and the importance of taking these into account at a national level when considering Australians' aspirations. It also acknowledges issues of reconciliation, issues of disparity in terms of opportunity, the importance of equity and culture. It makes no attempt to distinguish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations from those of other Australians, which could be taken to mean that they are homogenous. However, it does attempt to identify issues of concern for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under thematic headings. The progress framework itself recognises diversity without following the pattern of other indicator frameworks that appear to focus on 'gaps' and disparities. Nevertheless, the notion of 'progress' and aspiration as they are presented in the consultation and the existing headline indicators (ABS, 2012b), continue to support the discourse by using lenses that assume uniformity and homogeneity of aspirations and outcomes across the nation.

Assumptions driving the discourse and data

There should be no doubt that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are in many ways different from other population groups and peoples in Australia. There is no single indicator that captures the breadth of aspirations of the nation as a whole, despite the attempts of the MAP process to do so. Difference and diversity can be celebrated. However, seldom is the richness and diversity of life in remote communities discussed in the media, let alone the literature. Nor are the learning journeys of many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders often celebrated. It is however heartening to see an alternative rhetoric emerging from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, who allow those of us who are non-Indigenous to take a step back from our otherwise uncontested philosophical positions and reflect on difference in terms of epistemologies, axiologies, ontologies and cosmologies (see for example Arbon, 2008; Ford, 2010; Nakata, 2008) rather than deficits.

Why is it then that the deficit discourse dominates the landscape of policies, polities and practices? What is behind the rhetoric associated with the discourse? It is argued here that the basis of the rhetoric derives from a set of assumptions about the theoretical and philosophical foundations of education—and acceptance or rejection of philosophical positions.

The discourse of education and individualism

Education is sometimes seen to of most benefit to individuals. Pring (2010) however, argues that the language associated with education and its aims is often unhelpful. He describes an 'educated person' in terms of intellectual development, practical capability, community participation, moral seriousness, pursuit of excellence, self-awareness and social justice. By contrast, the rhetoric around quality education is often discussed in terms of a narrow frame of reference which sees the purpose of education largely prescribed by an individual's ability to live independently (that is, in financial self-sufficiency through paid employment) and to a lesser extent by conforming to the social norms and expectations of the nation. The focus on individualism has its roots in Greek philosophy and perhaps more so in Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant and Rousseau, who emphasise individual autonomy and individual freedom (for a discussion of the historical development of philosophies of education see Carr, 2010). The argument of liberalist education philosophers suggests that 'schools should encourage competition between individual students and prepare students to live independent lives in society, respecting their uniqueness and distinct capabilities' (Portelli & Menashy, 2010, p. 421). Individualism is also reflected in the economic theories of Adam Smith (1904) which is reflected in what could be described as free market capitalism. Advantage in education then is seen as a vehicle for economic independence, financial resilience and increased earning power. Education is seen in this light as an investment with a rate of return (Becker, 1993).

The discourse of education and social theories

There are however, other philosophical theories that underpin our current education systems. John Dewey saw the purpose of education as an end in itself, for 'growth' (Noddings, 2012, p. 39). While this is to some extent an individualistic process, Dewey (1938) does acknowledge the need for mechanisms of 'social control' in education, though he tends to view these as 'indirect.. not direct or personal… not external and coercive' (Dewey, 1966, p. 39). George Counts, a follower of Dewey's, was concerned that individualism did not allow for moral and social formation and education inevitably involved some elements of imposition or influence and that education itself needed to promote a 'theory of social welfare' (Counts, 1932). A more intentional theory of social transformation is proposed by Paulo Friere (1970), but not from the structures in which power resides. Rather he saw education as a transformative process in which: 'The revolutionary effort to transform these structures radically cannot designate its leaders as *thinkers* and the oppressed as *doers*' (p. 107).

The field of the sociology of education is somewhat more recent than the fields of educational psychology or philosophy. One of the earliest scholars in this field, James Coleman conducted the first major study of sociology in education with his 1966 *Equality of Educational Opportunity* project, which resulted in significant findings about school resourcing and desegregation in American schools. In terms of the latter he found that minority students benefited from attending high schools with White students (Schneider, 2000). However, perhaps his greatest contribution to the field was his *Foundations of Social Theory* (Coleman, 1990) in which he described what he called the development of 'social capital'. His discussion about the development of norms is particularly relevant. He suggests that those who lay claim to a norm—'beneficiaries'—can legitimately impose sanctions on those who do not necessarily hold the norm —'targets'. Inevitably, the target will consider the consequences of the sanction when deciding whether to comply or not. He also suggests that the stronger the social ties, the greater the social capital and concomitantly, the greater the trust between the various actors. Social capital fosters normative behaviour 'that enhances the productivity of the system. This is accomplished through the fulfilment of expected obligations that are reciprocal and that engender trust' (Schneider, 2000, p. 377).

The development discourse and education

The hope of education is that it leads to a better life, particularly for those living on the margins of society. Leadbeater (2012, p. 23) suggests that education 'offers them a hope that their place in society will not be fixed by the place they were born' and that through education people can 'remake their lives'. There is a strong view among many educationalists that education should have a strong focus on social justice and transformation (Oakes et al., 2013).

> *Because it provides knowledge and skills, encourages new behaviour and increases individual and collective empowerment, education is at the centre of social and economic development.*(UNICEF et al., 2010)

The international literature on education and development suggests strongly that better education leads to increased levels of development (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007; Keeley, 2007; OECD, 2012a). The empirical evidence that education and learning is related to a range of benefits including social equity (Field et al., 2007; OECD, 2012b), health (Ross & Mirowsky, 2010), justice and criminal behaviour (Lochner, 2011; Machin et al., 2011), employment, economic and developmental (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2009; OECD, 2012a), family and individual outcomes (Schuller et al., 2004) is readily available in an array of literature. Economists Oreopoulos and Sylvanes (2011) identify a range of what they term 'non-pecuniary' benefits of schooling:

> *Schooling generates occupational prestige. It reduces the chance of ending up on welfare or unemployed. It improves success in the labor market and the marriage market. Better decision-making skills learned in school also lead to better health, happier marriages, and more successful children. Schooling also encourages patience and long-term thinking. Teen fertility, criminal activity, and other risky behaviors decrease with it. Schooling promotes trust and civic participation. It teaches students how to enjoy a good book and manage money. (pp. 179-180)*

While there is some debate about the causal relationship between development and education—which drives which (see for example Chabbott & Ramirez, 2000)— there is a more pervasive view that education should and generally does give advantage to those who participate. It is the kind of advantage that allows learners to get ahead rather than just 'get by'.

The knowledge and skills discourse

Advantage in education is often discussed in terms of knowledge and skill acquisition. Students go from a position of not knowing, to knowing; from not having skills, to having skills. The various educational theorists (such as Vygotsky, Piaget, Erikson, Montessori and Dewey) each present different ways that this knowledge is acquired by children and throughout life (see Mooney, 2000). The purpose here is not to discuss the various theories of learning. Rather, the aim is to assert a view that for educators it is reasonable to expect that it is 'possible, and desirable for people to *know and do* things, and to engage in and take seriously the fruits of *rational inquiry*, where such inquiry is understood to involve the pursuit of *truth'* (Siegel, 2010, p. 283). This assertion, coming from a philosopher of epistemology raises more questions than it answers. While defending this proposition, Siegel acknowledges the contentious nature of knowledge, rational enquiry and truth.

However, when we consider curricula and the apparently universalist approaches to knowledge transfer, built on the foundations of literacy, numeracy and the sciences, we are led to ask *whose knowledge* is given privilege, *whose logic is applied to rational inquiry*, and *whose truth* is assumed. Carr (2009) suggests that there are no objective epistemic grounds on which to base curriculum. Rather there is 'nothing but competing political arguments' (p. 297) which determine the value of knowledge.

The recent work of Joy de Leo (2012) sheds light on the priorities of the Australian National Curriculum in the light of historical international documents that define the basis of education systems. Her analysis shows that in Australia, the references to values in education that are reflected in the international documents, such as equality, responsibility, democracy, participation, dignity, freedom, security and peace (de Leo, 2012, p. 85) are virtually absent in the Australian National Curriculum. De Leo argues that the 'integration of values in the curriculum also contributes significantly to the personal, psycho-social, spiritual and emotional development of the whole learner' (p. 220).

Knowing these political and ideological positions allows us to critically reflect on the various ontologies, cosmologies and axiologies that are applied to our epistemologies and pedagogies. The philosophical foundations of the Australian education system as it is now are shaped by Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, then in the Enlightenment period, by Rousseau and in the 20th Century, by Dewey (see summaries in Johnston, 2010; Noddings, 2012). These philosophers (among others) bring a history of western thought to contemporary education and their influence in schooling and teaching are undeniable. More recently a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics are challenging the unquestioned philosophical assumptions of the mainstream and presenting alternative ways of being, thinking, believing and valuing to education and learning (see for example Arbon, 2008; Ford, 2010; Nakata, 2008). They allow us to step back from our uncontested assumptions and think differently about what an advantaged education might look like in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts, particularly in remote communities.

ADVANTAGEOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

While there may be debate about the finer points, the foregoing discussion presents a number of theoretical bases from which the Australian education system draws. These theoretical and philosophical bases offer lenses through which we may view *advantage* in education. In Australia, the ideals of education are expressed in the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians.* These goals in brief are:

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

Goal 2: All young Australians become:

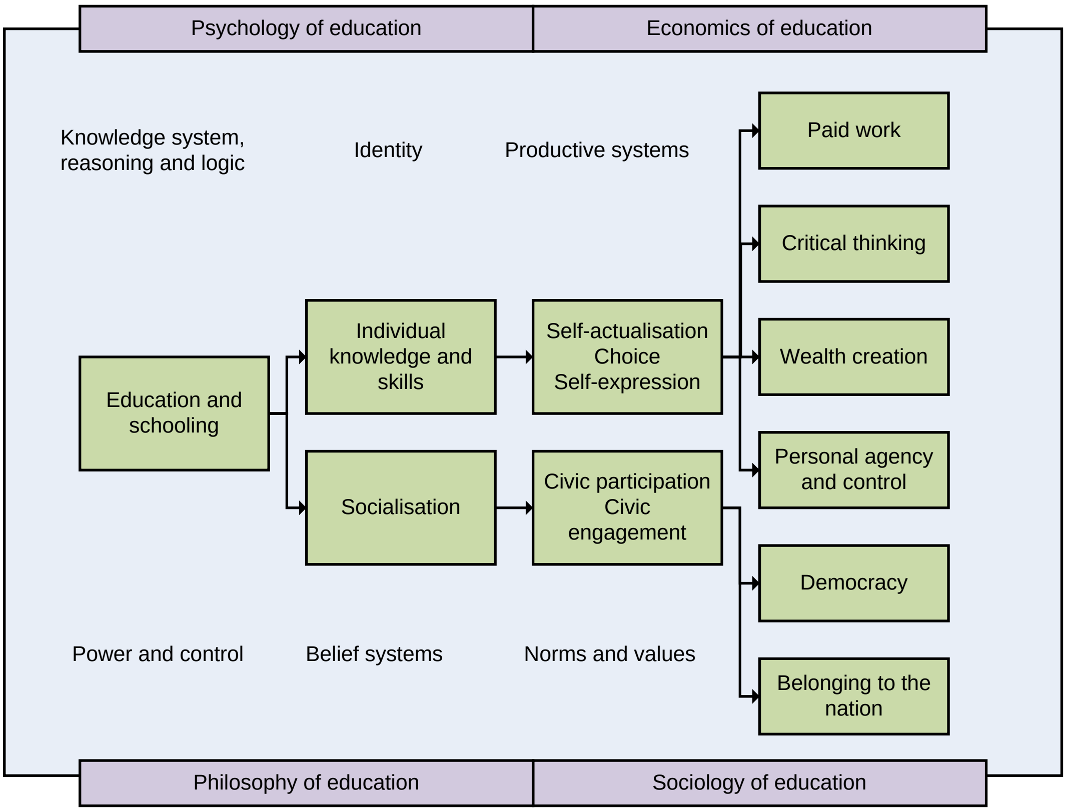
- successful learners
- confident and creative individuals
- active and informed citizens (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008, p. 7)

They are also reflected with varying emphases in Australia's *National Education Agreement*, which articulates the objective of schooling in Australia from a policy perspective that: 'All Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy' (Standing Council on Federal Financial Relations, 2012, p. 5).

Figure 2 attempts (perhaps imperfectly) to represent the Australian education system bounded by these theoretical and philosophical ways of viewing the world. The education system is one of many systems that operate within these boundaries. Other systems (represented in the diagram as surrounding the educational process) cut across or influence the education system generally in ways can be mutually supportive. For example, systems of power and control, already embedded in the democratic political and economic structures of the nation, govern to a large extent how education plays out in terms of its defined measures of success and anticipated outcomes. Similarly, community and cultural norms, values and identities align to varying degrees, with the norms, values and identities supported by schools.

It follows that those who are able to align their identities, values, beliefs and ways of knowing to this education system, will be more likely to succeed and thrive because of the system—and produce the expected outcomes of education, which Figure 2 describes in terms of paid work, critical thinking, wealth creation, personal agency and control, democracy and belonging to the nation. It is therefore proposed here that those who are unable for whatever reason to align their identities, values, beliefs and ways of knowing to this system are less likely to succeed.

Figure 2: ***A frame of reference for advantage in the Australian education system***


Psychology of education
Economics of education
Knowledge system, reasoning and logic
Identity
Productive systems
Paid work
Critical thinking
Individual knowledge and skills
Self-actualisation Choice Self-expression
Wealth creation
Education and schooling
Personal agency and control
Socialisation
Civic participation Civic engagement
Democracy
Power and control
Belief systems
Norms and values
Belonging to the nation
Philosophy of education
Sociology of education

The measures of advantage are aligned to the logic of the system. For example the measures of success for students in this system include:

- Transitions to employment (high achievement is rewarded with better paid work);
- Further and higher education transitions (high achievement in literacy and numeracy unlocks the world of critical thinking);
- Occupational destination and status (increased status yields greater individual wealth);
- Career choice (the broader the range of choices the greater the apparent personal agency); and
- Progress and aspiration (a better education leads to societal and national progress).

If the above are indicators of advantage, the converse of the above is logically an indication of disadvantage. For example, disadvantage in Australia would be represented by:

- Higher levels of unemployment;
- Low achievement in English language literacy and numeracy
- Low levels of wealth;
- Higher levels of welfare dependence;
- Social marginalisation; and
- Disengagement from the democratic process.

The logic behind the discourse is in some ways circular. You are educationally disadvantaged because your ways of being, valuing, believing and knowing do not align with the prescribed system requirements. Any attempt to live outside this system is not recognised as advantageous because there is only one education system that produces advantage. There is ample evidence from within and outside Australia, particularly among indigenous and minority group writers to support this claim. Research in Latino contexts of the United States suggests that there is a strong link between acculturation (adoption of norms and values of the dominant culture) and educational outcomes such as aspiration and progress towards college or careers (Cano et al., 2012; Castillo et al., 2010). Similarly, among Aboriginal Canadian scholars there is a recognition that assimilation and acculturation are factors that need to be taken into account when developing educational systems that are affective for indigenous peoples of that country (Alan Ijiig, 2000; Battiste, 2002). Likewise in the United States, Native American writers discuss the need for *Red Pedagogy* (Garcia, 2011; Grande, 2004) which 'aims to construct a self-determined space for American Indian intellectualism' (Grande, 2009). Our point here is that while Figure 2 is *a* way of conceiving an advantageous education, there are other ways of constructing advantage—ways that are not dependent on acculturation and assimilation but are instead built on knowledge systems, identities, belief systems, norms and values, which reflect the cultural systems of minorities within the dominant or mainstream society. Further, in the world of adult learning there are examples in Australia that we could learn from and potentially apply to schooling—for example ranger education programs (Ayre & Verran, 2010) and more academic structures in universities (see Nakata et al., 2012).

TOWARDS A NEW DISCOURSE OF SUCCESS IN REMOTE LEARNING

The schema presented in Figure 2 is a construct based on a series of assumptions about how and why education works—at least for most people in Australia. But if we could start from scratch without constraint would it look any different if it was planned to work for a remote Australian context?

What would happen for example if we underpinned our new system with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander philosophies? What would happen if we incorporated into our system a new set of norms and values, identities and knowledge systems? What would happen if we built into our new curriculum, a set of values that reflected internationally recognised expectations of equality, responsibility, participation, cooperation, dignity, freedom, security, peace, protection (conservation), respect, dialogue, integrity, diversity, tolerance, justice, solidarity (de Leo, 2012 Appendix 18)?

Would curriculum be built on the real world needs of those living in remote communities? Would it connect directly to land and culture? Would it facilitate knowledge about local histories, while at the same time open up a dialogue and frame of reference that allowed learners to see their histories as dominant, rather than subsumed by global and national perspectives?

Would the strong focus on individual learning be replaced by a cooperative approach? Would the process of education lead to self-actualisation or an alternative standard based on a different hierarchy of needs? Would civic participation be replaced by something completely different? Would the education system start with the premise of schooling or some other teaching and learning structure?

What would happen if the outcomes of education were reshaped to better suit the needs of people living in remote communities? Would the list include those suggested in Figure 2, and if they were included, would they be redefined? Without wanting to pre-empt the array of possible answers, maybe the list would include emphases that redefined the nature of work; that allowed for remote problem-solving skills; that targeted the ability to live in two worlds; that recognised the importance of maintaining and strengthening culture; or that focused on belonging to country?

Life on country is sometimes seen as a disadvantage in itself, partly because of the apparent lack of 'real economies' to sustain employment; partly because of the inherent disadvantage associated with isolation from the urban centres of Australia. But we would question that way of thinking. There is scope for recognising and advocating for the advantage that accrues from living on country. Indeed, there could well be a need for a 'red dirt curriculum' that seeks to impart knowledge about the value (economic, cultural, and general wellbeing) that could be derived from the richness of the land itself. Teaching young people how they could exploit the value of land for their benefit, perhaps through negotiations about land and resource use by miners and tourists, could be incorporated into the curriculum.

We raise these questions to prompt the beginnings of a new discourse of success in remote learning. Rather than focus on what needs to be fixed either in the system or fixed in the community, we would like to promote a discussion that considers firstly how success might be reimagined, and secondly how a system might be reshaped, based on alternative set of paradigms. The discourse will be one of *advantage* rather than disadvantage. Our research methodology is focused on bringing forward the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote communities. The kinds of questions raised above are the kinds of questions we are seeking answers to.

CONCLUSIONS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote communities face a number of challenges. Those challenges are inevitably seen from a western frame of reference without consideration of what may be important or valuable to those people themselves. A reliance on data, as it is presented in national data sets—particularly those on education—fails to take account of the local context. National measures of success may be a convenient way of comparing progress, but they tend to be dismissive of the differences that mark the diversity that exists in remote communities. We are not suggesting that we should ignore the challenges, but we should not necessarily be consumed by gaps, disparities and disadvantage. Nor are we suggesting that we should dismiss the aspirations of many in remote communities who would want to buy in to the western paradigms and assumptions discussed in this paper.

The paper has attempted to provide a rationale for the discourse of disadvantage in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. It has done so by examining the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the current education system in Australia, drawing on the literature of the philosophy of education, the sociology of education and the psychology of education. From these sources we have shown that purpose and outcomes of education in Australia are underpinned by a set of foundational assumptions that are largely hidden from view in the disadvantage discourse itself, but which strongly influence it. The assumptions reveal that the *presence* of particular system elements and prescribed system outcomes related to work, wealth, critical thinking, personal agency and control as well as democracy and belonging to the nation, frame the indicators and therefore the rhetoric of educational advantage. The *absence* of these system elements and outcomes is therefore reflected in the discourse of disadvantage.

As educators we agree that education can have a transformative effect. If 'education is the key', as it is sometimes described, we have to be sure about what door it may unlock. Maybe we need to change the locks, not to keep students out, but to allow a different 'way in'. That way could well incorporate a 'red dirt curriculum', it could incorporate 'red dirt measures of success', 'red dirt aspirations', and 'red dirt teachers' who are fully embedded in the context of remote Australia and who can straddle the worldviews of those living in urban centres, as well as those living in the remote centres.

To better reflect the philosophical and theoretical assumptions that underpin an advantageous education for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, we propose that there must be an alternative set of elements and outcomes. We cannot at this point of our research say precisely what they may be, but once we learn what they are, the education system will be in a better position to respond to the needs of those living in remote communities. Further, the various actors in the system should be able to reframe their rhetoric towards one of advantage rather than disadvantage. But perhaps these questions remain: What levers can we use to influence the system accordingly and ultimately will the system be able to respond? While on the one hand it is perhaps useful to promote lofty and laudable ideas (which could be described as ‘blue sky’ thinking) we are particularly concerned to produce findings that are grounded in the reality of our context—hence the notion of red dirt thinking.

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