Conspiring to inspire community aspirations through remote education

John Guenther
Flinders University, Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation
0412 125 661 john.guenther@flinders.edu.au

Abstract

According to national reports on student outcomes, remoteness influences students' ability to succeed at school. That is, the more remote students are, the more likely they will not succeed. While this holds true for the entire population, it is more noticeable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Many education stakeholders have conspired for a long time to improve remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. The results of these attempts is a set of strategies, programs and interventions that are designed to inspire students to lift their aspirations. It would seem, based on the publicly available data, that despite the effort applied, little has changed in remote community schools over the last seven years.

One reason for this, according to data from the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's Remote Education Systems (RES) project, is that the strength of local views about what an education should be for, may have been underestimated or not understood by remote education strategy designers. Similarly, how students are inspired in remote community schools may not have been taken into account. Drawing on four years of RES research, this paper will firstly unpack what aspiration and inspiration look like from remote community perspectives. Secondly it will consider the impact of system-wide strategies on remote communities. Finally, the paper will consider how repositioning education in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, not as an issue of geographic remoteness, but as one of cultural distance, might help better shape a system-wide response in the future.

Introduction

Schools in Australia are sometimes described, categorised and defined by the geography in which they are located. Geography is a broad discipline that intersects with others including economics, demography and education. In many cases these categorisations we refer to in this paper, are driven by the needs of statistical geographers who construct visual representations (maps) of location on the basis of social, economic, demographic and cultural data. These categories are then used to label schools in a particular way, and remote schools are then tagged as 'disadvantaged'. Furthermore, labels of indigeneity are used similarly, and so remote schools with Indigenous students are doubly disadvantaged.

The data used to justify these inscriptions reinforce the perceptions of deficits, gaps and failure that pervade the rhetoric that comes from government and media sources. The data do not lie. But they do represent success and failure in ways that reflect the ontologies and axiologies of the hegemonic powers that prescribe what is acceptable or not. While those issues have been discussed elsewhere, they are important when definitions of inspiration and aspiration are considered.

The point of this paper though, is firstly to ask what success and aspiration might look like, if a remote standpoint was taken into account. Secondly, I want to consider how aspiration might be inspired through remote schools. This paper is based on findings of the Remote Education Systems

project, which is one of a number of research projects within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation.

Before I present some of the findings though, I'll briefly outline some of my assumptions that have shaped the project team's thinking. I'll first consider how geography and education mesh together. Then I will introduce definitions of aspiration and success.

Literature

Educational and statistical geography

While I am not a geographer, I invariably use or borrow from the discipline of geography. Even though I use geography in teaching and research I am by no means an expert in this specialised field. Both education and geography share multidisciplinary traditions where overlaps occur with other disciplines such as economics, anthropology, sociology, history and politics (Ahamer, 2012; Taylor, 2009). Taylor argues that geography contributes to education at a number of levels, from micro 'embodied geographies' of the learner, through to the sites of learning in institutions, and on to the meso level of rural education and education markets, then to the macro level 'globalisation of knowledge' (Taylor, 2009, p. 658). In terms of education markets, the relevance of geographies of education to rural and remote places is evident, where choices about *where* students go to learn are determined not only by demand but also supply of education and the social dynamics of a given community. Consider the map of discrete Indigenous communities shown in Figure 1. In these remote communities, the choices parents have to make about where their children go to secondary school are often determined by the absence of schools in the place they call home. Of the more than 1000 communities in 'very remote' parts of the country represented on the map, only 162 have a school and even fewer have secondary programs. The choices parents and young people make are more often than not, not made on the basis of *where* they think there is more advantage. The net result is what Corbett (2009) describes as 'geographic disembedding' (p. 4). It is a phenomenom not restricted to Australia. It happens within other countries (Taylor, 2001) and across countries too (Waters, 2006). Geography does matter to education. However, it is not necessarily the physical or spatial location that matters as much as the perceptions that people have about the culture, economy and social opportunities that exist in the space.

The funds of knowledge terminology (see Moll et al., 1992) can be a useful entry point for considering the presence of knowledge, skills, values and aspiration, rather than focussing on their apparent absence where educators and systems tend to:

> *...assume they come from socially and intellectually limiting family environments, or that these students lack ability, or there is something wrong with their thinking or their values, especially in comparison with wealthier peers*. (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986, cited in Moll et al., 1992 p. 20)

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

Success in educational literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schooling is defined variously in terms of academic performance, outcomes retention, graduation, attendance and qualification (see for example Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Often the definitions are tacit—as if everyone knows what success is—so that the reader must make sense of the meaning by the context (see for example Andersen, 2011; Craven, 2012). Sometimes the term is used in conjunction with 'closing an achievement gap' or removing disadvantage (for example O'Keefe, Olney, & Angus, 2012).

In the literature on the philosophy of education, success is viewed more broadly in terms of achievement of the broad aims of education: its epistemic aims, such as building knowledge, truth and skills (Robertson, 2009); its moral and political aims (Brighouse, 2009), its individual capacity and capability development aims (Pring, 2010); as well as its intrinsic value as an end in itself (Marples, 2010). Seen in this light, a 'good' education will provide hope (Leadbeater, 2012), self-efficacy, personal agency as well as social justice and equity (Lingard, Sellar, & Savage, 2014).

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

Outcomes for very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

In 2014 there were 162 very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the five jurisdictions RES analysed (SA, NT, WA, QLD, NSW). These schools had an average enrolment of 113 students and a median enrolment of 59.5. Of these, 148 had students attending in Years 3 and 5; 134 had students in Year 7 and 96 had Year 9 enrolments. Participation rates tend to decline beyond the primary years. They are small schools and mainly deal with the primary years up to Year 7. Beyond that, boarding schools are increasingly expected to play a role in educating remote students to Year 12. The 162 schools represents a very small proportion of the approximately 9500 schools across Australia. But they do stand out.

In Australia, school systems are generally concerned about the following things for remote schools:

- Closing the Gap (overcoming Indigenous disadvantage);
- Low attendance rates;

- Low levels of academic performance;
- Low rates of Year 12 completion;
- Low transition rates into employment.(Australian Government, 2015; COAG Reform Council, 2013; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014)

While I don't want to seem overly negative, Figure 1 shows what some of the data say about remote outcomes compared to non-remote and non-Indigenous outcomes. This is for Year 3 and by the time students get to Year 9, less than 10 per cent of remote students in the Northern Territory achieve the National Minimum Standard.

Figure 2. Remote vs non-remote, Indigenous vs non-Indigenous by geolocation, Per cent at or above National Minimum Standard (based on NaPLAN scores) 2014

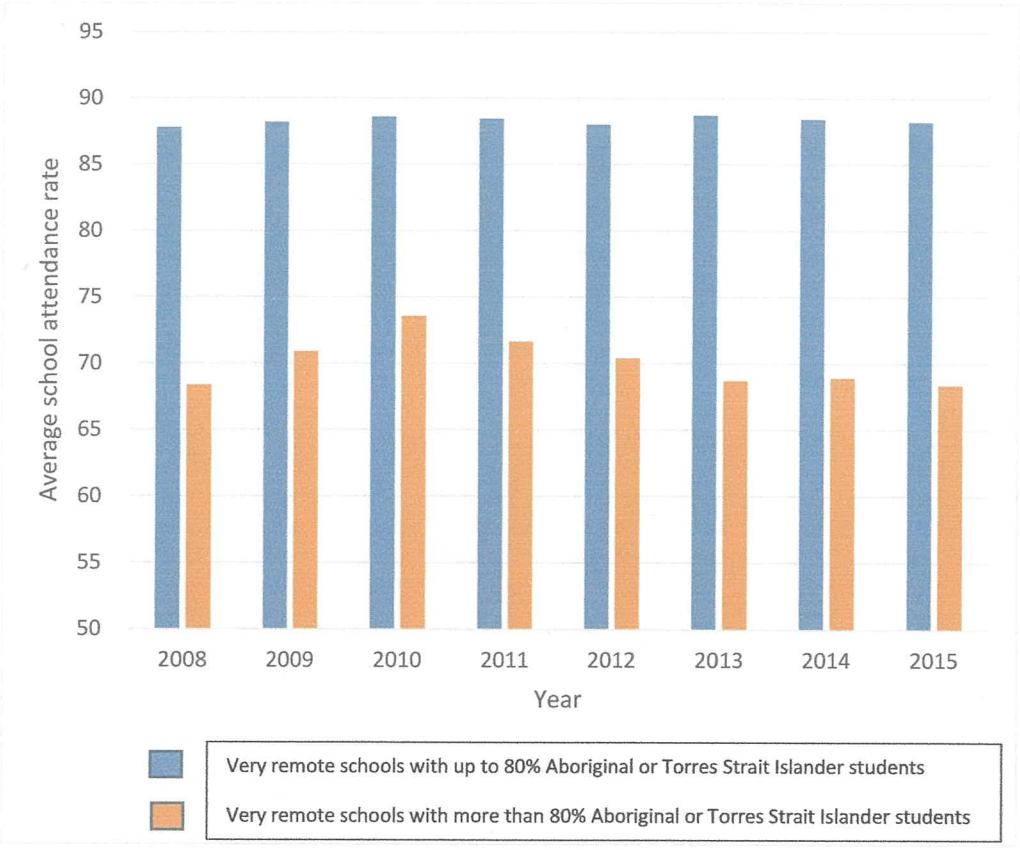
Year 3 Reading

	Geolocation	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
NT	*Metro*	-	-
	Provincial	68.2	87.9
	Remote	46.5	93.2
	Very Remote	16.2	90.9
Aust	*Metro*	83.5	95.1
	Provincial	80.0	93.5
	Remote	59.8	92.3
	Very Remote	37.4	90.9

Source Adapted from (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014)

Much of the blame is placed on what many describe as 'poor attendance'. In very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, attendance rates are about 68 per cent. In schools across Australia attendance rates are generally above 90 per cent. What is interesting to note in Figure 2 is that despite the effort and concern applied to remote education, nothing has changed since data was first reported for 2008, on the My School website. In 2008 attendance rates were 68 per cent. In 2015, after going up for a few years, they were back to where they started.

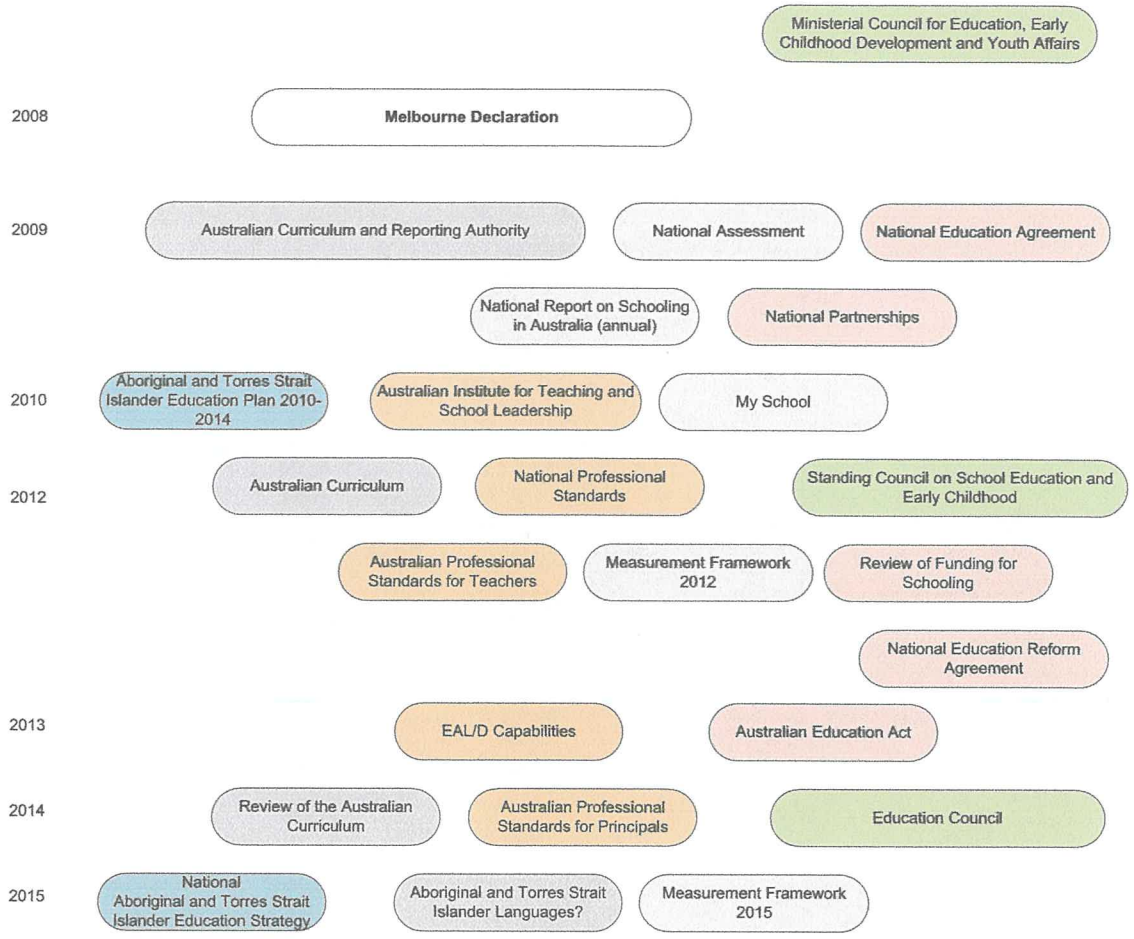
Figure 3. School attendance rates for very remote schools, 2008-2015.



Conspired interventions designed to inspire

There is no shortage of strategic policy designed to address the 'deficit'. Figure 3 is an attempt to capture a range of policy driven initiatives that have been introduced since the 2008 Melbourne Declaration. While not all these initiatives are directly targeted at remote Indigenous schools or students, the overall intent is to improve education outcomes. Some are directly designed to address 'disadvantage' and 'close gaps'. If attendance is any indication, as shown in Figure 2, then collectively they have not worked particularly well.

Figure 4. Strategies designed to improve outcomes

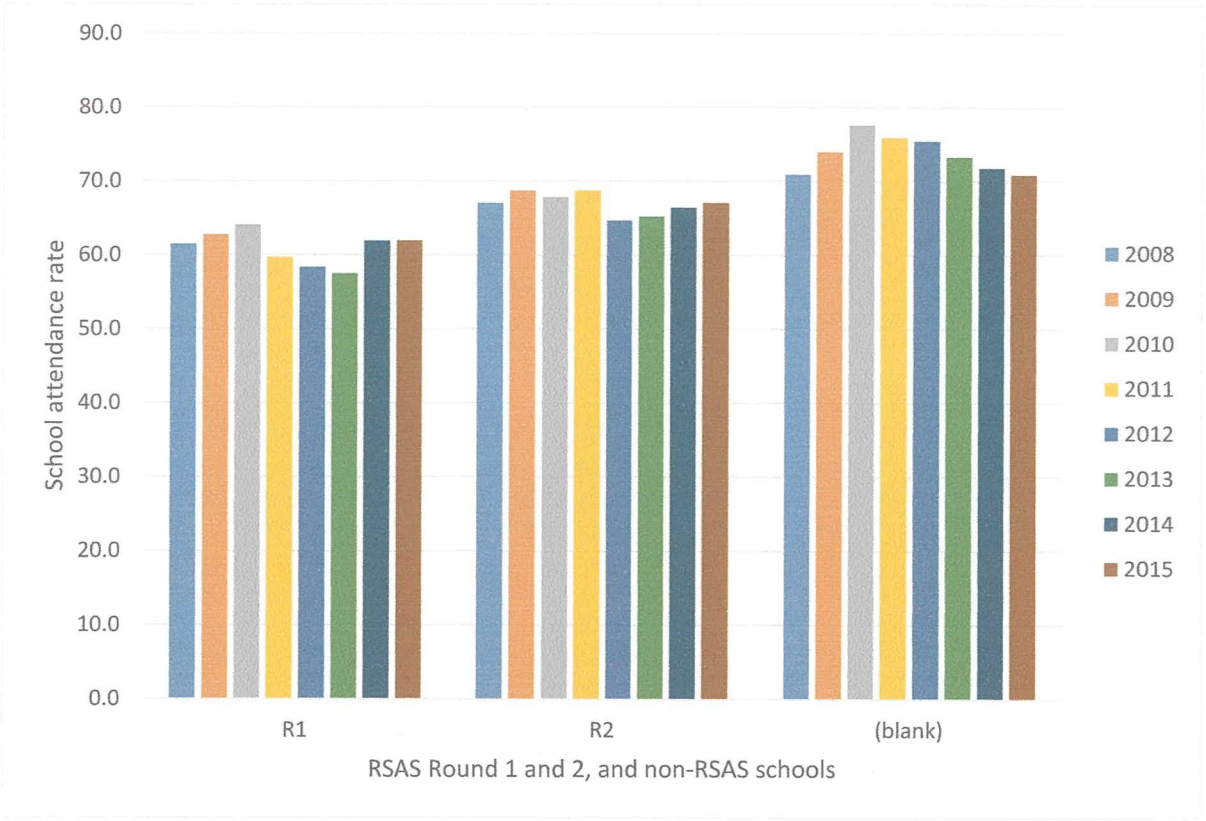


Some strategies have been designed to target particularly 'poor' performing schools where school attendance and academic performance is low. One of these more recent initiatives is the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS). Even this approach, as Figure 4 shows, has done nothing to lift attendance above the 8 year average for all RSAS schools.

The best that could be said for the program is that is has 'closed the gap' between RSAS and non-RSAS schools, but this is largely because attendance rates at non-RSAS schools (the third set of bars) has declined significantly from the 8 year average, from 70.2 per cent, to 68.7 per cent. For Round 1 RSAS schools the attendance gap with non-RSAS schools in 2012 was 17 per cent. In 2015, this had declined to 8.9 per cent.

Regardless, none of the data presented suggests that in these schools are particularly inspired to aspire to what schools have to offer. For all the money spent, if the best we can say is that we have stemmed the tide of declining attendance, then I'd say we have done poorly. What would it take to inspire students to engage in what is on offer, along with the apparent benefits of an education.

Figure 5. Impact of RSAS on school attendance, very remote schools with > 80 per cent Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students



Methodology

Research questions

Four research questions (RQs) underpin the RES research described here. Qualitative data collected from all sources described below, have been examined for responses to these questions.

RQ1 What is education for in remote Australia and what can/should it achieve?

RQ2 What defines 'successful' educational outcomes from the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?

RQ3 How does teaching need to change in order to achieve 'success' as defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?

RQ4 What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?

Data sources

The data on which the RES project research is based comes from a variety of sources as shown below in Table 1. Qualitative data were collected during the period from mid-2012 through to the end of 2014. Sites for interviews and focus groups included Alice Springs, Adelaide, Yulara, Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Wadeye, Darwin, Perth, Broome and two online focus groups with participants coming in from across all Australian states except Tasmania. Data collected from the physical sites included participants from several communities across remote parts of Australia. We interviewed teachers, assistant teachers, school leaders, community members, policymakers, bureaucrats, university lecturers and researchers, vocational education and training (VET) and higher

education students, youth workers, child care workers, education union members and representatives from non-government organisations (NGOs).

Table 1: Document sources and coding references

Document source	*All sources*	*All coding references**	*Remote Aboriginal references**	*Number of unique participants*
Interviews and focus groups	45	2501	523	250
Field notes and observations	12	111	0	0
Secondary sources/reports created by or for RES	10	856	603	~800†
Butchers papers and whiteboards	20	197	0	0
Total	87	3665	1126	

* Includes coding references assigned outside of the RQs

† Note that some survey reports used for this analysis did not detail the participant numbers.

We also accessed the extensive data available on My School and analysed it. My School now has seven years of data with an array of variables that provide insights into student performance and attendance along with the demographic makeup of schools. For each year, we extracted data from about 260 very remote schools (the number varies slightly from year to year), placed it into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and carried out various analyses on a selection of the variables. Our main concern is for the very remote schools that have high proportions of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students. Hence the analysis we show later in this paper is only for those schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. Among other things, My School captures information about schools' workforce and differentiates between teaching and non-teaching staff. By its definition, teaching staff are those who are qualified as teachers (generally with a bachelor degree) including principals, and non-teaching staff are those who are not teachers. They could be teaching assistants, administrators, clerks, receptionists, home liaison officers, grounds staff or bus drivers. We recognise that a community's definition of 'teacher' or 'educator' may not be the same (for a discussion of this see Shore et al., 2014).

Analysis

Data from all our qualitative sources were incorporated into a single NVivo™ database. NVivo is qualitative data analysis software that allows 'references' (which could be images, text, audio or video) to be 'coded' (given a theme). The codes are represented in a hierarchical structure of parent and child 'nodes'. Audio files created during interviews and focus groups were transcribed before being imported into the database for coding. Images of whiteboards and butchers paper and handwritten notes were scanned into the database. Electronic reports with secondary source data were also imported into the database.

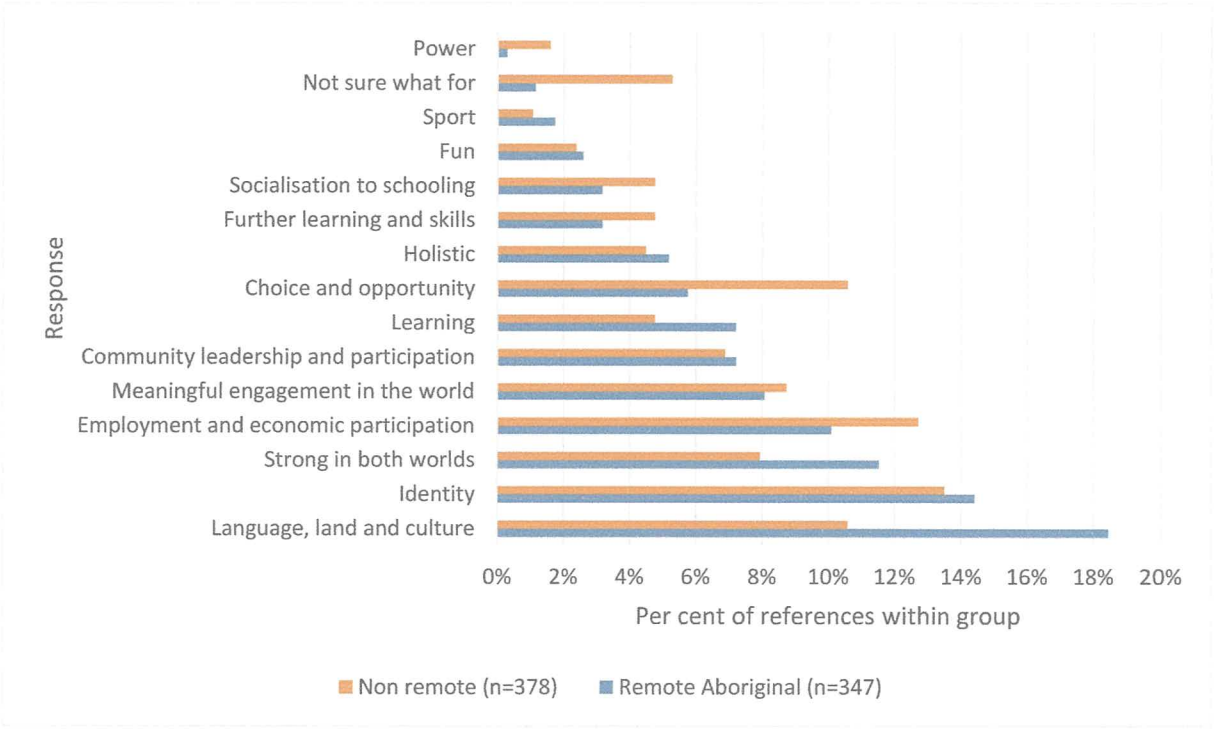
The process of coding involved several steps; it is a highly interpretive task that requires considerable critical reflection. In the first instance the project team came together to conceptualise a coding structure built on the RQs. Some nodes were proposed at this time. Following this, the team worked on coding each document each member was responsible for. Additional nodes were created as required, consistent with a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin, 2010). The team then came together for a two-day workshop to test the structure and validate coding. Following this, the team finalised the coding of sources and moderated other team members' codes

before coming together again for a further two day workshop to rationalise the structure, check node content and consider implications of the data. The process was completed in February 2015. A more detailed summary of findings is presented in a technical report (see Guenther, 2015). Readers interested in more detail, should read this report.

Findings

What *are* the aspirations that remote community members have for their children? What do they think education is for? The data shown in Figure 5 paints a fairly clear picture. Our remote Aboriginal respondents offered two main purposes for education. The first is about maintaining connection to language, land and culture. The second was about ensuring that young people maintain a strong local identity. Further down the list we can see employment as a motivator.

Figure 6. Remote community aspirations: What is education for?



If the above diagram describes aspiration for remote Aboriginal people, Figure 6 describes success. Here we see that for remote Aboriginal people parents and community members being involved is success. And while academic outcomes rated second, this was not about NAPLAN scores, Year 12 completion or parity with mainstream academic outcomes. Rather, respondents talked about being able to read, write and count in English.

Figure 7. Descriptions of success in the RES data

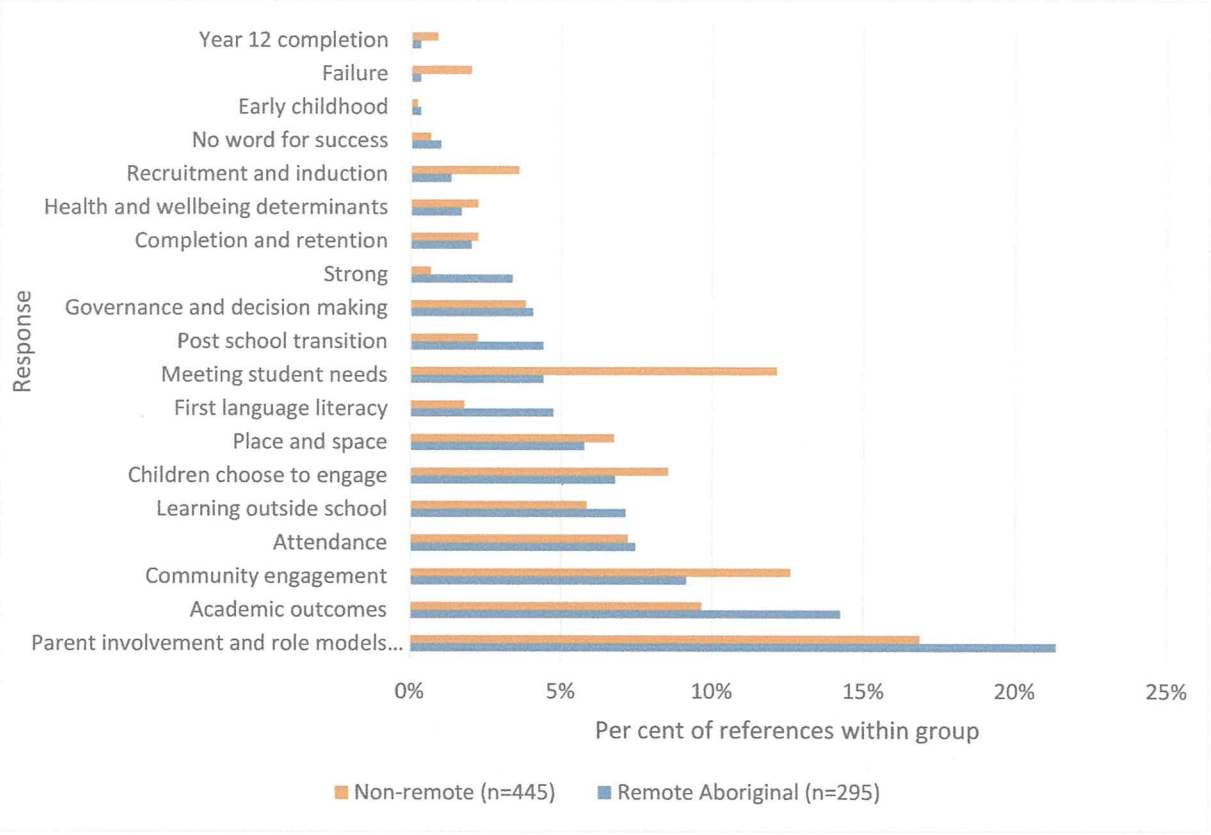
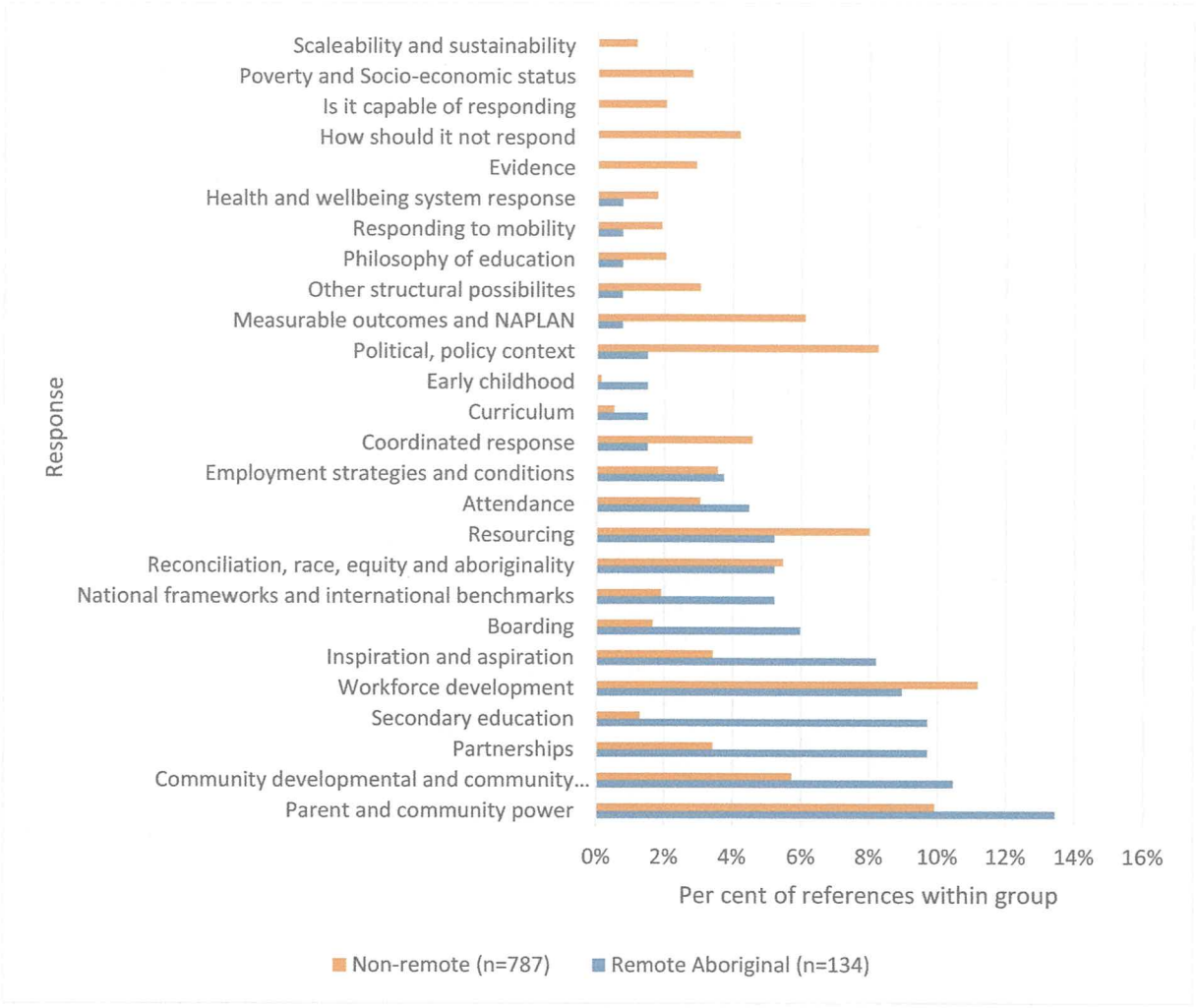


Figure 7 summarises the results for responses to RQ4, which was about what a system response should look like. What stands out in the top three responses is the importance of community and parent power, partnerships, and developmental approaches. Put simply, our respondents wanted community to be involved in their young people's education—they want the system to work with them. What I think they are saying—and I recognise this is somewhat interpretive—is "if you want our kids to be inspired, then work with us, listen to us, invite us to be part of the governance and decision making processes of remote schooling".



Discussion

This then leads me to the main question posed in the Introduction. How would we conspire to inspire young people in remote Aboriginal communities to aspire through education? There has been no shortage of conspiring, as Figure 3 showed. But as we saw in the attendance data presented, all this conspiring has done little to inspire young people to want to engage. So what did our data suggest might work?

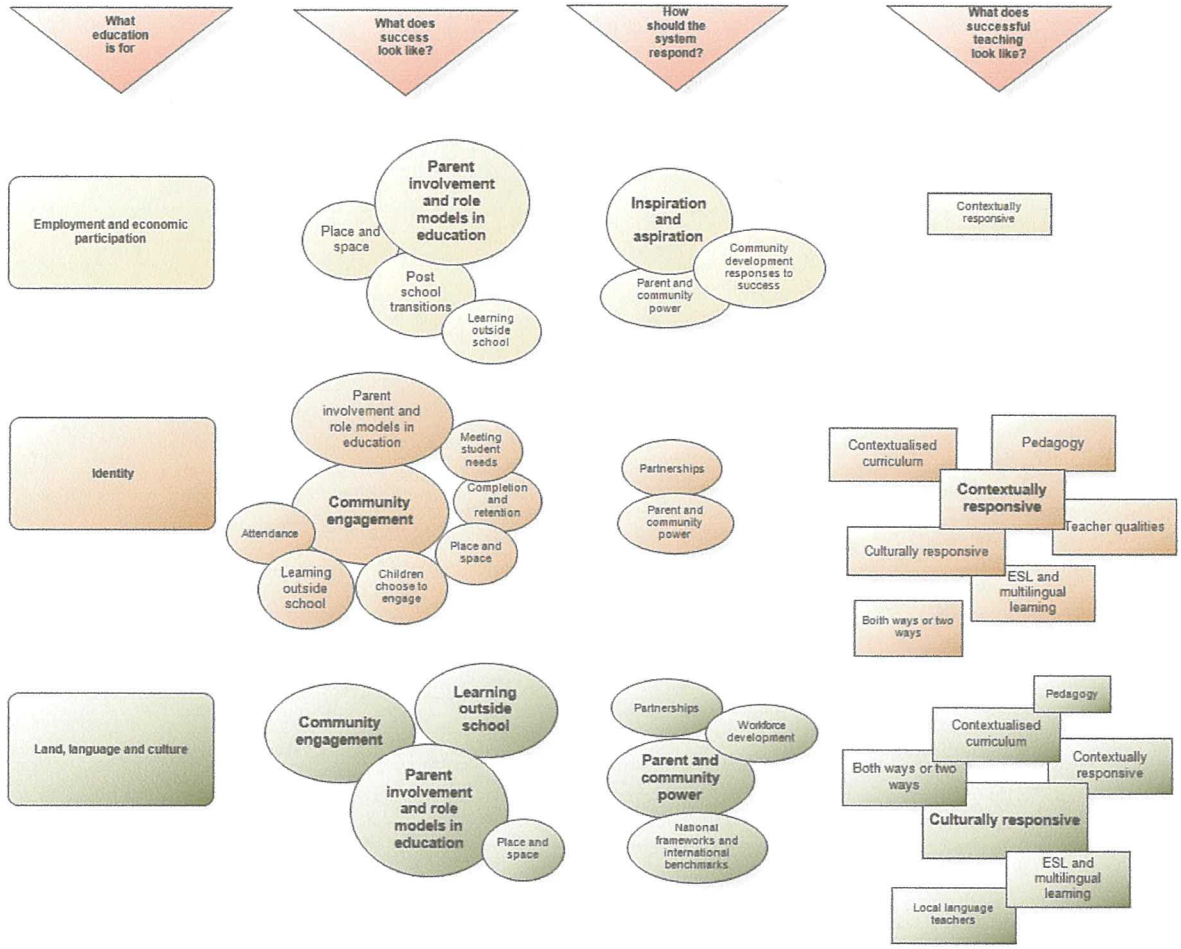
That depends on your philosophical starting point for the purpose of education. In our cross cutting analysis of the themes we were able to identify points of intersection in the data, so that for example where someone spoke about employment outcomes as a purpose of education, they may have also talked about what success in schools looks like, how to teach to that view of success and how the system should respond. Figure 8 shows these points of intersection for three starting points of purpose: employment and economic participation, identity, and land, language and culture.

Applying the employment filter we see parent involvement as the key indicator of success, and supporting inspiration and aspiration as the system response. Co-occurrences under successful teaching were quite limited, with just one co-occurrence related to contextually response teaching appearing in the model. So while the thinking around employment as an outcome of school was quite well developed, and in theory the idea was that the system should inspire young people, respondents did not talk about how that should be achieved in schools.

When the identity filter is applied, we see success defined as community engagement, with a number of minor themes around this; a limited view of the system response built on partnerships and community power; and a cluster of teaching responses built around contextually responsive approaches. In other words, if you want to inspire young people to retain a deep sense of who they are and where they belong in the community, you will engage the community in respectful partnership and ensure that schools are contextually responsive.

Applying the land, language and culture filter, we see success built around three key themes of community engagement, learning outside school and parental involvement. The system response is then seen with a key theme of parent and community power, supported by a cluster of teaching responses built around culturally responsive approaches. In other words if you want to inspire young people to remain connected to their language, land and culture, you will involve parents and community members as role models in school, you will give parents control of local education and you will ensure that schools are culturally responsive.

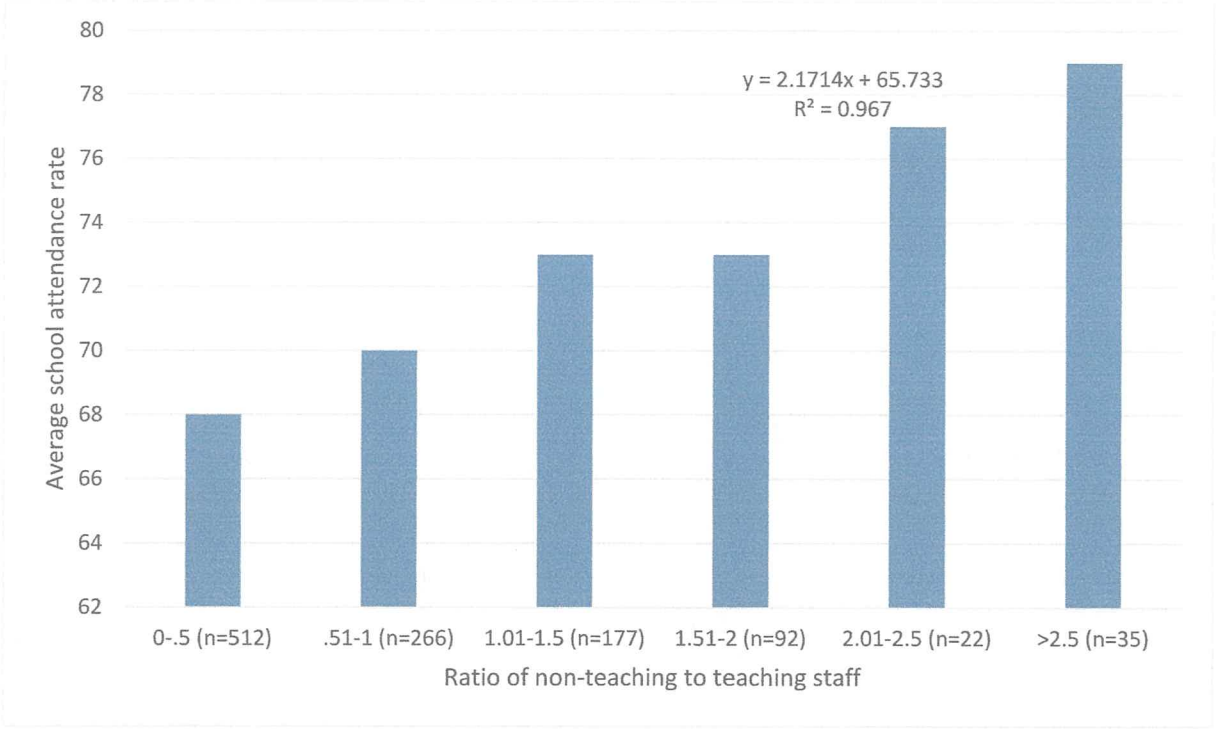
Figure 8. How to inspire, looking through the lens of 'what education is for'.



But what does parent and community power and involvement actually mean? It could mean involvement in governance and leadership, but more simply, it might mean having locals employed at school. Our analysis of seven years of my school data shows a strong correlation between local employment and student engagement (measured as school attendance). On average, higher local employment could increase attendance rates by as much as 11 per cent. While we cannot be certain

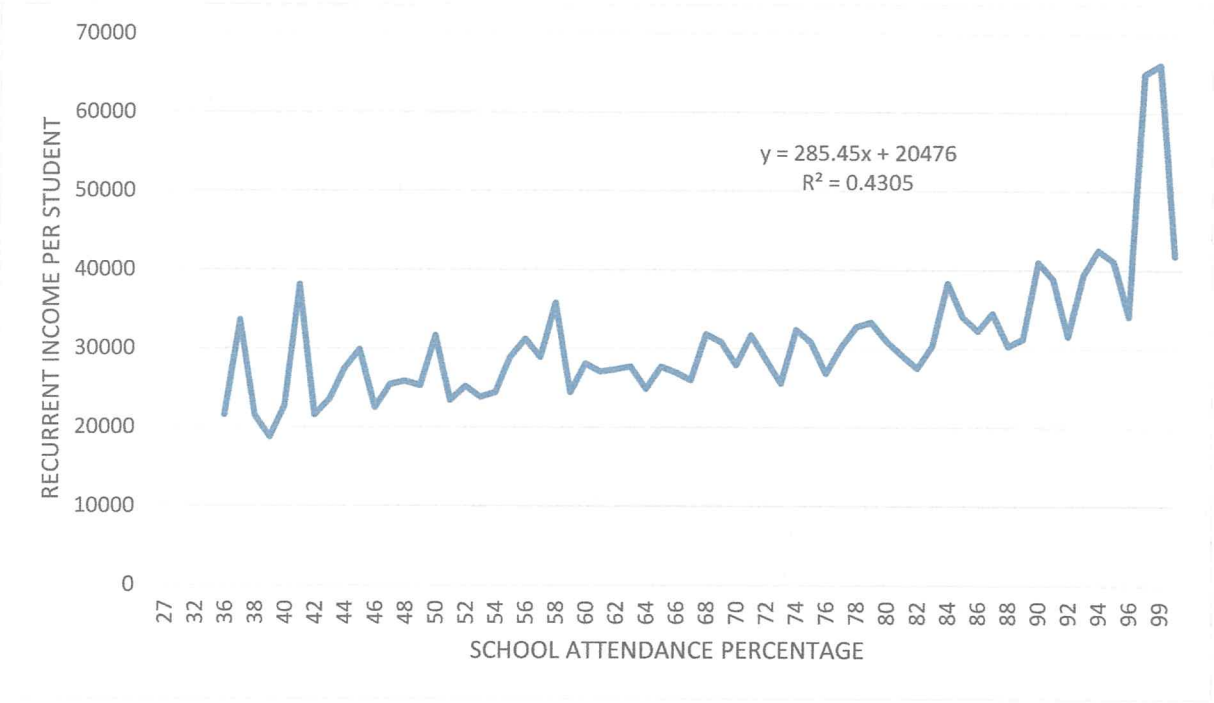
of a direct causal connection our qualitative data supports that local staff act conspire to ensure that young people attend schools.

Figure 9. Staffing to inspire



The question of whether resourcing makes a difference to aspirations is seldom asked. There is some argument in the literature that 'throwing money' at the problem of Indigenous education does not make a difference (Hattie, 2003; Melbourne Graduate School of Education, National Insitute of Labour Sudies, & NOUS Group, 2011; Quiggin, 1999, p. 135). And at one level, this is correct. For all the financial resources put into strategies designed to make a difference (see Figure 3), the publicly available data suggests that little if anything has changed (see Figure 2). However, it is a different story when we look at resorting of very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students. Figure 10 shows the impact. Schools with recurrent funding per student of between $20 000 and $30 000, on average have attendance rates of about 50 per cent. Schools with recurrent funding in the range of $30 000 to $40 000 on average, have attendance rates of about 80 per cent. Again, while we cannot be certain of a causal link between school finances and attendance, a logical reason for a relationship like this flows from the ability of schools with more resources to direct funds to building local staff capacity, either in terms of numbers or through professional development. Further while I would caution making the direct connection between attendance and aspiration or even inspiration, attendance is certainly one indication of student engagement (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012).

Figure 10. Resourcing to inspire



Source: My School data,2010-2014

The above charts only measure (crudely) how engaged students are with what schools have to offer, assuming that attendance is an indicator of this. However, they do not measure how well schools are delivering what communities want. At one level, this should not be that difficult. For example, if language is important for communities, does the school have a program that teaches students to read and write in their own language? If culture is important, how well does curriculum align with aspects of culture? If identity is important, to what extent do learning activities support a strong sense of local identity and belonging? Some of these measures could be achieved with a simple audit. Others could be measured with perception surveys. However, while these are all doable, the bigger question is one of accountability: to what extent are schools accountable for these outcomes?

Conclusions

In summary, let me recap the main arguments of this paper. First, it is important not to blame remoteness for apparent 'lack' of aspiration. While geography might be important for education, in itself it does not determine whether young people 'aspire' or not. As the literature suggests, the whole argument for inspiring aspirations needs to be seen in the context of the ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies that underpin choices young people and their families make about education and their imagined futures. If we as outsiders are to take those philosophical standpoints seriously then our assumptions about how inspiration happens should perhaps be reconsidered.

While I agree that teachers can play a role in inspiring young people in remote communities the reality, based on the Remote Education Systems project findings is that more inspiration occurs as a result of significant family and community role models. This then means that schools and systems more generally should work with communities to inspire communities. While this is hardly a surprising finding, what is surprising is the number of schools that employ very few local people. And perhaps surprisingly too, is the difference this makes to an important indicator of engagement/ inspiration: attendance. And as the analysis of My School data shows, this kind of inspiration can

Ford, P. L. (2010). *Aboriginal Knowledge Narratives and Country: Marri kunkimba putj putj marrideyan*. Brisbane: Post Pressed.

Guenther, J. (2015). Overview of Remote Education Systems qualitative results. *CRC-REP Working Paper.* CW025, Retrieved, July 2015 from http://www.crc-rep.com.au/resource/CW025_RemoteEducationSystemsQualitativeResults.pdf

Hattie, J. A. (2003). *Teachers make a difference. What is the research evidence?* Paper presented at the Building Teacher Quality: What does the research tell us? (ACER Research Conference), Carlton Crest Hotel, Melbourne. http://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2003/4

Leadbeater, C. (2012). *Innovation in Education: Lessons from pioneers around the world*. Doha: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing.

Lingard, B., Sellar, S., & Savage, G. C. (2014). Re-articulating social justice as equity in schooling policy: the effects of testing and data infrastructures. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 35*(5), 710-730. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2014.919846

Marples, R. (2010). What is education for? In R. Bailey (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Education* (pp. 35-47). London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Masters, G. (2013). The Power Of Belief. In P. Hughes (Ed.), *Achieving Quality Education for All: Perspectives from the Asia-Pacific Region and Beyond* (Vol. 20, pp. 3-8). Dordrecht: Springer.

Melbourne Graduate School of Education, National Insitute of Labour Sudies, & NOUS Group. (2011, August 2011). Schooling Challenges and Opportunities: A report for the Review of Funding for Schooling Panel. Retrieved,

Moll, L. (1992). Bilingual Classroom Studies and Community Analysis: some recent trends. *Educational Researcher, 21*(2), 20-24.

Nakata, M. (2007). *Disciplining the savages, savaging the disciplines*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

O'Keefe, K., Olney, H., & Angus, M. (2012). Obstacles to success: Indigenous students in primary schools. Retrieved, April 2013 from http://www.appa.asn.au/reports/Obstacles-to-success.pdf

Oxford Dictionary. (2013). Aspiration. *Oxford Dictionary.* from http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/aspiration?q=aspiration

Pring, R. (2010). The Philosophy of Education and Educational Practice. In R. Bailey, C. McCarthy, D. Carr, & R. Barrow (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (pp. 55-66). London: Sage Publications.

Purdie, N., & Buckley, S. (2010). School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students. *Closing the Gap Clearinghouse.* Issues Paper No. 1, Cat no. IHW 33, Retrieved, July 2011 from http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/documents/issues_papers/ctg-ip01.pdf

Quiggin, J. (1999). Human Capital Theory and Education Policy in Australia. *Australian Economic Review, 32*(2), 130-144. doi: 10.1111/1467-8462.00100

Robertson, E. (2009). The Epistemic Aims of Education. In H. Siegel (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (pp. 11-34). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. (2014, November 2014). Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2014. Retrieved, December 2014 from http://pc-temp.clients.squiz.net/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/181909/key-indicators-2014-report.pdf

Taylor, C. (2001). The Geography of Choice and Diversity in the 'New' Secondary Education Market of England. *Area, 33*(4), 368-381. doi: 10.2307/20004178

Taylor, C. (2009). Towards a geography of education. *Oxford Review of Education, 35*(5), 651-669. doi: 10.1080/03054980903216358

Waters, J. L. (2006). Emergent Geographies of International Education and Social Exclusion. *Antipode, 38*(5), 1046-1068. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2006.00492.x