

Chapter 19

Reconstructing the Deficit Discourse in a Multi-Remote School in far North Queensland

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One of the long-standing images and identity markers of the continent of Australia in the international imagination is of large open spaces [“the Bush”], housing remote and sparsely populated communities or settlements. The image of the remoteness of Australia has sustained national narratives of an enduring frontier-type lifestyle, embodied in the mythic construction of the Drover, for example. To a lesser degree, notions of remoteness also anchor myths and narratives regarding the indigenous population of this place, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

With a current population somewhere in the order of 24 million located within an area of 7.6 million square kilometres (approximately 3 million square miles), Australia is indeed a land of large space and relatively small population. In reality, it is a highly urbanized place, with somewhere around 90% of the population living in large metropolises and sizeable provincial cities and towns in very close proximity to the coast, such that around 85% of the country has a

population density of no more than 1 person per square kilometre. Geographically, remote here is very remote, and those who live in these areas find themselves with the challenges of distance insofar as the provision of and access to public facilities, transport and other infrastructural amenities, and central social services such as health and education.

In addition to, and further complicating the geographic dimension of remoteness for some groups in a particular society, culture acts as another dimension of proximity and remoteness. As much as one can be physically or geographically remote from centers of population one might also be at distance from dominant or mainstream cultures. This is certainly the case with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples, who, despite being at times geographically located close to the center are at great distance culturally, politically, economically, and spiritually from the dominant mores of the community. The impact of such cultural alienation in many ways parallels those of being physically remote; where the physically remote find difficulty in securing access to services readily available in the metropolis, the culturally remote find similar difficulties in being able to locate and access—that is, to deal directly with—the epistemologies, ideologies, hegemonic ways of knowing and being that those culturally close take as universal or commonsensical.

This chapter looks to explore the effect of being both physically and culturally remote in broadly cultural but more specifically educational terms. The chapter touches on the ways in which Indigenous Australian people have essentially been discursively positioned as uneducable through the operation of a deceitful discourse of deficit. We then move on to feature an example of alternative practices in the education of culturally remote students in a far North Queensland

State [public] school. The physical remoteness of this particular school brings with it a number of advantages for affecting a critical indigenous education, one that seeks to secure understanding, respect, and acceptance of the ways of the Other. In this, we hope to excavate some of the facets of critical education work where the embrace of schooling as a means to securing a stronger democratic environment and civic engagement beyond that of being merely good consumers and compliant workers figures prominently in both individual and collective philosophies and imperatives.

The Context of Australian Indigenous Education: Standardized Testing, Deficit Discourse and the “ineducability” of Indigenous Students

In ways typical of many other colonizer countries, responsibility for the provision of education—essentially, schooling—for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been a multi-level governmental undertaking. Whilst under the Australian Constitution, responsibility for education resided with the six State governments, decades of constitutional evolution have seen the reality of much of this responsibility being taken over by the Commonwealth (Federal) government. This has occurred largely as a result of the complex development of conditional or “tied” budgetary grants made by the Commonwealth to the States.

The “official” image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools is one essentially of ineducability, there being perhaps no more indicative “compensatory” program title than *Closing the Gap* (COAG, 2012) to reflect this deficit view of the educational capacities of Australian indigenous students. The then Prime Minister’s (Tony Abbott) opening statement in the 2015 *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister’s Report* makes it very clear that the official

narrative of learning is tethered to formal Western senses of what and where it means to be educated: *"It's hard to be literate and numerate without attending school"* (AustralianGovernment, 2015, p. 2). This report then starkly acknowledges a failure on the part of the myriad projects nestled together under the *"Closing the Gap"* funding banner to make any real progress towards the 2018 target of halving the gap between the reading, writing and numeracy achievements of non-indigenous and Indigenous students, (unusually) confessing that *"There has been no overall improvement in Indigenous reading and numeracy since 2008"* (AustralianGovernment, 2015, p. 4). The unwritten ending of this statement is probably along the lines of "despite governments spending large amounts of money over many decades on this". If the commitment of government—and by extension, the community as a whole—hasn't been wanting, then the problem must surely lie on the side of the recipients of this social concern and consequent financial largesse. There must be, goes the logical extension here, an inherent problem, a lack or deficit in the cognitive capacities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They simply aren't able to learn these things, or, at least, those things required by the formal school curriculum.

An interwoven discourse surrounding the casual factors of indigenous learning deficit is that of environment. One might see all of the facets of "environment" as falling within the general purview of the notion of cultural capital, particularly in the complex constellation of two of the three forms in which such capital manifests and exists; viz.

in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body;[and] in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243)

In other words, in this discursive regime, the learning deficits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are the product of a lack of the types of cultural knowledge, expertise and material possessions sufficient to connect with the ways of knowing and being expected, required and taught by the formal schooling process. As such, these students lack the cultural capital necessary to secure social and economic normalcy, legitimacy, acceptance, and in the logic of the dominant culture, success.

Intertwined, these two narratives of indigenous ineducability paint pictures of contemporary forms of the primitivism and sub-human status that has marked previous depictions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In one very thorough historical exploration of the representations of indigenous peoples in the Australian context, Heather Sharp (2010) analysed the representations of Aboriginal Australians in official syllabus and associated teaching materials (textbooks, school papers, children's storybooks, etc) used in Queensland schools over an approximately 100-year period. Whilst she was looking largely at the history curriculum, Sharp's summation of the place of Indigenous Australians in the official school narrative of nationhood is important here:

Indigenous Australians are not excluded from the narrative, although their inclusion is constructed based on a passive and subjugated identity (p. 410)

In her study, Sharp identified persistent themes in official school materials that are highly relevant to the point being made here. She identified what she called discourses of Indigenous Australians as being "savages/primitives" (p 309), "monocultural" (p. 358), "on the fringe of history" (p. 352), and presenting as "problem-laden" (p. 357). The crucial point is that over an extended time period, generations of children have absorbed ("learned") certain things about Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander peoples; teachers have presented (“taught”) such problematically one-dimensional and culturally-pernicious ideas about Indigenous Australians; and these peoples have come to see themselves represented in these ways repeatedly and consistently in the various forms of official knowledge (Apple, 1993).

This last effect is a major tool in the armoury of colonisation and both leads to and reinforces the intergenerational alienation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from their cultures and ways of life. The power and impact of a process of learning to see oneself as seen by dominant forces in a society has been the focus of attention and concern for well over a century, from du Bois’ notion of double consciousness (*this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.* (1903, p. 9) through Franz Fanon’s exhortation to the colonised to pursue what he called resistance to cultural amputation (1967, p. 140) (*resisting the colonizing knowledge system that constantly pathologizes and criminalizes blackness and misrepresents it as an agent of malevolent powers there to cause harm to the white world* (Adjei, 2010, p. 87) to Albert Memmi’s analysis of *the colonialist hoax* (1967, p. 91).

In the Australian context, Martin Nakata (2007), writing from a Torres Strait Islander perspective, comprehensively charts the development of Western knowledge about and representations of Torres Strait Island peoples and cultures that flowed from the activities of various agents of colonisation—religious, scientific (especially anthropological) and educational—that for all intents and purposes has come to assume the non-partisan status of “knowledge”:

My task was not simply to know my position but to know first how I was positioned in and by Western disciplines and knowledge practices. My task then was to know how such a knowledge system created a position for Islanders through which we have all come to view Islanders and their problems. (p. 11)

A further significant piece of work relevant to the arguments of this chapter is that of Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell in her book *Southern Theory* (Connell, 2007). Connell's purpose in this particular book was to explore the ways in which academic disciplinary knowledge—particularly that of sociology—developed from a Western center, mirroring the physical exploitation of the colonized worlds [mining, plant and animal trafficking, etc.] through the ways in which it effectively “mined” non-Western knowledge resources and proclaimed the output as its own. In the pursuit of such an appropriation of intellectual resources of the colonized world, Connell argues, the power and significance of such intelligence resident within the Periphery (the colonised) had to be largely rendered invisible or at the very least, derided as primitive or superficial. One can see this strategy in place with regard to Australian Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing, and arguably this process continues apace through the application of Western-based processes of assessment, evaluation, and categorization of Indigenous peoples as holding both an inferior “traditional” or cultural knowledge and a seeming inability to “succeed” within the Western canon.

To flesh out further the situation regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and to use the current dominant language of assessment—statistics—we can draw out a number of inevitable conclusions regarding the constructed reality of learning of Indigenous Australian students. The primary source of such statistical—and thereby accepted commonsensically as apolitical

and objective; that is, “accurate”—knowledge is the annual National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). NAPLAN operates under the auspices of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). The annual NAPLAN tests have been visited upon students, teachers and schools since 2008, and are claimed to test achievement in *the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life, such as reading, writing, spelling and numeracy* (ACARA, 2013).

What do current statistics tell us about the competencies—a.k.a. learning achievements—of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students? Drawing from the most current set of figures available at the time of writing, the 2015 NAPLAN Report (ACARA, 2015), Indigenous Australian students “lag behind” their non-indigenous counterparts across all of the several areas of testing. The areas tested in years three, five, seven and nine of formal schooling annually are Reading, Persuasive Writing, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation and Numeracy. In the area of Reading, for example, the official image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in year nine of formal schooling tells us that currently:

- 71.7% nationally meet expected standards in reading compared with nonindigenous students, 93.6 % of whom meet these standards;
- this disparity is consistent across the four school years of NAPLAN testing [years three, five, seven, and nine];
- the percentage of Australian Indigenous students meeting minimum expectations in reading decreases markedly across the four geographical regions—metropolitan, provincial, remote, and very remote. 87.2% of Indigenous students in metropolitan areas meet minimum reading standards as opposed to 54.7% in very remote areas; and that

- less than 55% of Australian indigenous students in very remote areas meet minimum national reading standards compared to 96.5% of nonindigenous students in the same geographic regions.

So, from within this particular paradigm it would seem—in fact, the statistics prove—that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are significantly challenged in the basic tents of reading, and the more removed from urban areas students are, the more significant the challenge. As such, these statistics present as major markers of an educational crisis, with all of the attendant impacts on and consequences for life chances. The fact that there has been no improvement in these “objective” measures of educational achievement over many years, despite the dedication of billions of dollars, points to an underlying assumption of an Australian Indigenous incapacity to think or reason numerically. But is this the total picture, and how should educators respond to such statistics?

A commencing point would be for educators (in the first instance) to come to acknowledge that these two groups of students typically identified as being “behind” in most areas of the formal school curriculum—viz. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students—inhabit and straddle multiple and complex cultural and educational lifeworlds (Guy, 2015), the successful navigation of which requires adeptness at what might be seen to be a version of the originally linguistic concept of code switching:

In general terms, codeswitching can be used to refer to situations in which bilingual people alternate between languages, either between or within utterances. (Greer, 2007, p. 28)

The importance of the concept of lifeworlds to considerations of matters such as the concrete contexts of learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

cannot be overstated. Jill Guy, in her 2015 doctoral thesis that set out to explore the complexity of education and schooling of young Australian Aboriginal males, provides a useful summary of this phenomenon:

A lifeworld is a “communicative locale for affirming individual agency and forming cultural identity” (Ludert, 2010, p. 3). Husserl explained the lifeworld as the world of human activity and everyday sociability, taken-for-granted and always there as a background to other dimensions of life (Husserl, 1970). According to Nakata (2002) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ lifeworlds are situated in a cultural interface, a complex intersection of Indigenous and Western epistemological domains. It is the place where we live and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures and more to the point the place where we are active agents in our own lives, where we make decisions. (p. 285)

In this intensely personal research project grounded in the very concrete experiences of her participants, Guy documented the significant tensions experienced by these young Australian Aboriginal people as they tried to move effectively between and within Aboriginal and Western educational contexts. Clearly, there is not space within the confines of this chapter to delve more deeply into the specifics of Guy’s research, but the crucial point for this current chapter might well be summed up by quoting from her concluding section:

The participants within this project highlighted some of the challenges that are experienced with biculturality within Australia. There are many people, not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who inhabit complex educational lifeworlds that are comprised of more than the white, middle class cultural capital that is promoted within the formal schooling arena. It appears

as if many of these people will continue to experience the educative tensions that arise when these worlds clash, unless action is taken to change societal views. The cultural interface, the site where the Indigenous and Western epistemological domains meet (Nakata, 2002) has the potential to create a vibrant, strong and empathetic Australia. (Guy, 2015, p. 172)

On a systemic basis, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will likely continue to be positioned as “behind”, as being “deficient”. This is one of the strategies of subjugation attendant upon the colonization process, working in tandem with an ongoing process of epistemicide, *the murder of knowledge* (Santos, 2016, p. 92) whereby

Dominant epistemologies have resulted in a massive waste of social experience and, particularly, in the massive destruction of ways of knowing that did not fit [sic] the dominant epistemological canon. (Santos, 2016, p. 238)

This is what Andrade (1990 [1928]), a Brazilian poet, early last century called anthropophagy: *the American’s [coloniser’s] capacity to devour all that was alien to him and to incorporate all so as to create a complex identity, a new, constantly changing identity* (Santos, 2016, p. 52)

Until schools come to acknowledge, incorporate and value the power of the biculturality of their Indigenous students and communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will continue to be judged against less-than-honest criteria of educational attainment and found wanting.

Schools, however, that do operate from a strengths and needs based model, honouring the biculturality of Indigenous students, incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and building bridges within communities, have been able to assist Indigenous students achieve remarkable academic

attainments, ultimately working to expose and white-wash the discourse of deficit blemishing and restricting such Indigenous students in Australia.

Case Study: Rossville State School

Rossville State School is a small school located approximately 40 km south of Cooktown, tucked away in the coastal rainforest ranges adjacent to Cedar Bay National Park on the remote Cape York Peninsula. The local area boasts spectacular natural beauty set amongst the world's oldest living rainforests along the legendary Bloomfield Track that until recently was exclusively accessible by 4-wheel drive.

The school is on the traditional lands of the Kuku Nyungul. In the past, families were relocated, voluntarily and involuntarily, to missions such as Bloomfield River which lies 46 km south. Recently, there has been a move to return to live on country, with many families choosing to return to their ancestral grounds and join a growing community on Traditional Kuku Nyungul Freehold Land located on Shipton's Flat road or in local housing provided by the local Gungarde Aboriginal Corporation.

The school population is very diverse across a number of demographic categories. The majority of families who reside in the Rossville catchment area are chronically and often generationally unemployed. Socio-economic demographics of the school vary but average out to the sixteenth percentile Australia wide. There is a lot of variation, however, with some students coming from families with very limited formal education and generational poverty while other students come from families where both parents have post graduate qualifications and work in highly regarded professional roles. The school has a much higher proportion of its

students identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (27% of students enrolled in 2014) than the Australian average of 5.3% and the Queensland average of 7.6%.

In many ways, despite its remote location, Rossville State School is faced with the type of challenges typical of schools looking to equitably support students and families who have been traditionally disadvantaged while holding high expectations to extend all students. In meeting these challenges, Rossville State School has found itself positioned within the “cultural interface”, that point at which Indigenous and Western epistemological domains meet (Nakata, 2002) realising “the potential to create a vibrant, strong and empathetic Australia” (Guy, 2015, p. 172) and articulated in the school’s vision to empower and equip confident, connected and creative citizens. Moreover, significant improvements in student outcomes became evident quickly, in some instances immediately, demonstrating that meaningful change should not necessarily take a generation to achieve.

The Challenge

2014 presented the school with a number of challenges and opportunities with an entire turnover of administrative staff and most of the teaching staff. The immediate priority, therefore, was collaboratively creating a shared vision for the school and developing consistent school wide practices.

Official school performance data indicated that at the time student engagement was of particular concern as overall attendance for 2013 was 89.5%. The end of 2013 also saw an increasing amount of disciplinary absences and behaviour incidents, predominantly within the Indigenous student cohort.

Initial observations and data collection further revealed the diversity and complexity of the student population with 14% of students at least 2 years behind academically in formal (Western) literacy and/or numeracy. In addition, 23% of students required literacy support and 12.5% needed numeracy support. Altogether, 43% of students required literacy or numeracy intervention or extension. At the same time, analysis from a strengths based mindset revealed opportunities to extend students in areas where they excelled. Ignoring these opportunities and simply prioritising remedial interventions for funding and resources would have been the typical response of a deficit or Closing the Gap mentality. However, Rossville staff and community determined that a more culturally-appropriate and student-centred response to formal pressures to improve formal measures of educational attainment/achievement were both necessary and respectful of all students and their home cultures.

During term one, the entire teaching team came together to analyse school and student data, evaluate evidence based strategies and pedagogies and to consolidate the curriculum. Community outreach meetings were held and outside agency support solicited. Individual staff and school goals were set and plans put in place to achieve these targets. The result was an enhanced Whole School Approach: Confident, Connected and Creative Citizens.

A year later, attendance, behaviour and academic data showed significant improvements across the school. Analysis of 2015 NAPLAN data show that the intentional, targeted strategies enacted made obvious and sizeable impacts for all students. For the first time ever, 100% of students achieved above the national minimum standard in literacy and numeracy. Student attendance rates came within half a percent of the state average and school disciplinary absences were

the lowest on record. There has also been a dramatic increase in parent participation as caregivers are continually being connected to their child's learning.

Targeted and Holistic Intervention and Extension

To guarantee success for every child, Rossville's Pedagogical Framework relies on a continuum of multi-layered or multi-tiered support and extension services to meet the cultural, academic, physical and social/emotional needs of each child.

Mind

At Tier 1, the emphasis is on quality teaching and ongoing monitoring of learning. The Whole School Pedagogy, Curriculum, Assessment & Reporting Plan sets out how triangulated data is to be collected and used to plan and enact the Australian Curriculum to integrate curriculum where appropriate and backward map assessment and learning episodes to formal (mandated) ACARA Achievement Standards.

Students identified as requiring extension or additional support benefit from intentional strategies aimed at those students' particular needs. These Tier 2 interventions are focussed, increasing in intensity of instruction and frequency of monitoring.

Students who have not responded to Tier 1 or Tier 2 levels of intervention benefit from Tier 3 support that is highly personalised and individualised. Other professional expertise is engaged to determine students' needs and to assist in setting goals and action plans.

A core value that underpins Rossville's response to intervention strategies is that educational achievement, very broadly defined, is a human right. Everyone

has the right to succeed and feel proud of and to be recognised for their accomplishments. Every student should be given strategic opportunities to excel in their areas of strength. It is vitally important that teachers recognise each student's strength and intentionally create learning episodes within which students can identify and revel in their respective gifts.

For example, it is a school wide expectation that a student on tier 3 support with an individual curriculum plan be given the opportunity as part of that plan to develop their particular interests and talents. A student who is more than 2 years behind in official literacy and numeracy benchmarks would still be given the chance to learn robotics, computer coding, digital design or other pursuits that are frequently reserved for the "gifted and talented". Moreover, these subjects are delivered with rigour and are not simply treated as a "reward time" when students complete their literacy and numeracy tasks. All skills and knowledges are valued to promote student self-efficacy and life-long learning.

Body

To promote physical fitness and health, Rossville's Learning and Wellbeing Framework was developed as part of the Tier 1 Systems and include school wide routines to encourage healthy living.

Conductive hearing loss is a medical condition commonly suffered by children throughout Cape York, and is more prominent in Indigenous children. It usually involves a reduction in sound level or the ability to hear faint sounds. This has particular implications for young children's oral language and literacy. Children find it difficult to develop phonological or phonemic awareness which makes learning to read more challenging.

Because the condition isn't painful, it can be difficult for children to identify whether they are suffering from an episode of hearing loss so the school partners with outside agencies to regularly screen students and provide advice to teachers regarding universal and targeted supports to ensure every student can access quality teaching of the curriculum.

Students are encouraged to find a physical activity or sport that they enjoy and can excel at with an emphasis put on setting goals to extend one's personal best. Cooperative skills are promoted through team sports and participation in district regional sporting competitions and camps gives students the chance to extend their athletic skills and talents. Year 6 students with sporting interests and abilities are also often encouraged to apply for sporting scholarships to high schools. Over the past 2 years, a number of graduating students have secured scholarships or positions in elite sporting programs.

Spirit

Student engagement is paramount to success in school and later in life. Attendance and disciplinary incident data provided feedback that made student engagement a priority focus in 2014. Behaviour incidents started to increase in frequency and intensity and it became clear that the whole school behaviour system in place wasn't meeting the needs of all of our students.

Referrals were made to outside government and community agencies to assist with wraparound family support. An experienced social worker and psychologists were engaged to assist with developing new strategies to support high needs students suffering from trauma, grief and loss, features that are common and persistent for colonised peoples worldwide.

Cultural engagement was also identified as a priority. A Cultural Connections intervention was designed with local elders and an Indigenous teacher aide. As part of this strategy, Rossville hosted its inaugural National Aboriginal Day of Celebration in partnership with local Aboriginal community members.

Throughout these consultations, it became evident to the leadership and teaching team at Rossville State School that a significant shift was needed in theory and practice used to “manage behaviour”, to use official nomenclature. In fact, the very notion of managing behaviour was deemed contrary to the moral purpose of the school as it did not seek to challenge, extend and support students to become self-regulated members of society able to make sensible decisions.

A deliberate whole school move from enforcing compliance to maintaining connection saw the teaching team explore a variety of research, theory and evidence in search of a better way. A professional learning community was set up around analysing a variety of disciplines including neuroscience and positive psychology.

As a result, BOOST!, a home grown positive education program, was designed specifically to equip the students at Rossville with socio-emotional skills to practice resilience, mindfulness, empathy and collaboration.

Additionally, the language and practice around redirecting and responding to “misbehaviour” has changed significantly as the focus has shifted from rewarding and punishing to promote compliant behaviour to challenging each child to set goals and seek out support when faced with a challenge moment. Students are equipped and encouraged to self-regulate and seek out support to help them make positive decisions. Better self-regulation, risk taking and decision

making is carefully scaffolded for each individual child. Improvements are evident and often celebrated before new goals and higher expectations set and supported.

Highly Effective Teaching and Learning

To plan for intentional differentiation to meet the specific learning needs of students, professional development was delivered to teachers to enable them to share the results of formal diagnostic testing with their students in order to set learning goals to mutually “project manage” the students’ pathway to continued and enhanced achievement based on the Australian Curriculum Achievement Standards.

School Resources were primarily directed towards accelerating the learning of the 43% of students identified (or marked) by the national testing regimen as requiring intervention and extension. All students who were 12 months or more behind these reading or numeracy benchmarks were complex case managed with individual learning plans developed. In addition, a comprehensive before school intervention program was developed to target very specific skills to accelerate these students so that they could access the curriculum and begin to achieve at or beyond their year level.

Base-line data informed individual learning plans for every prep (kindergarten) student. A highly differentiated prep program was implemented and reading achievement was monitored fortnightly to inform targeted planning. Oral language and phonological awareness intervention was delivered to specific students and reading extension delivered to others.

Students requiring extension and acceleration were identified along with long term strategies to promote profound and lasting improvement articulated in

a Whole School Data & Advancement Plan to make it explicit when and how students would be supported and extended.

Explicit Teaching and Experiential Learning: A Clash of Pedagogies

Research indicates that direct instruction, teacher clarity, feedback and consistent classroom practices produce enhanced educational outcomes for students (Hattie, 2009). These practices are all features of a highly prescribed pedagogical practice identified as Explicit Teaching. The goal of Explicit Teaching is for students to acquire new skills by directing student attention toward specific learning in a highly structured environment. It is teaching that is focused on producing specific learning outcomes.

Content Strands are broken down into small parts and taught individually. This involves explanation, demonstration and practise. Students are provided with guidance and structured frameworks. Topics are taught in a (really, *one*) logical order and directed by the teacher (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

Another important characteristic of explicit teaching involves the teacher modelling skills and behaviours and modelling thinking. This involves the teacher thinking aloud when working through problems and demonstrating processes for students. Of course given the dominant whiteness of the teaching profession in Australia [as in many parts of the world] this “modelling of thinking” proceeds from a Western epistemological and ontological base. The attention of students is important and listening and observations are key to imitation and, consequently, “success”.

The goal of experiential learning, however, is to help students personally construct meaning of important ideas and processes. Explicit Teaching sets the

groundwork for teaching all new skills and concepts but experiential learning develops deep understanding, promotes problem solving and enhances creativity. It allows for, and in many ways is strengthened by, multiple ways of knowing. It creates a space for multilogicality (Austin, 2011; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008)

By the beginning of 2014, Rossville's existing pedagogical framework relied exclusively on explicit teaching as its signature pedagogy. In developing a more balanced and enhanced pedagogical plan, the teaching team sought out to define examples of best practice to encourage experiential learning where effective and appropriate. A key priority in 2014 was reading. In 2012 and 2013, the school worked hard to develop consistent practices for the explicit teaching of reading including structured guided reading scripts and daily consolidations. While data showed that reading scores were improving for the lowest performing students, it was evident that strategies needed to be enacted to extend high achieving students. Philosophy was introduced across the school as a component of the literacy program to promote discussion, analysis and reflection.

Play based learning is an important element of the early years program (at the very least) and all children should be involved in guided play to develop social skills, problem solving and creativity. The arts lend themselves to exploration and play based pedagogies. Over the past few years, the curriculum focus at the school was the introduction of the Australian Curriculum in English, Mathematics and Science. Additional pressure to achieve school and system wide set benchmarks in literacy and numeracy measured by the NAPLAN tests have further provoked a narrowing of the enacted curriculum. As a result, the arts had been relegated to the margins of the classroom.

The development of an enhanced curriculum framework provided the staff, students and community to reflect on the role of the arts in school, reprioritise its inclusion in the curriculum and consider best practice pedagogies. Resources were budgeted towards engaging a music teacher one day a week. All students in the school worked in small groups so that they could receive individual coaching with a focus on expression, composition and team work.

Further school-based research revealed that student voice and choice would engage more students and promote deep learning through specialised projects. From term 4, 2014, weekly Art and Innovation electives were introduced to provide students with an opportunity to go into detail in an arts specialty each term.

So far, clowning, fashion design, robotics, cooking, drama, dance, digital design, stop-go animation, painting, drawing, computer coding, typography and collage have been offered. Projects have culminated in end of term performances and permanent school signage and displays. Last year the fashion design students designed their own labels, catalogues and lines of jewellery that they displayed and sold at a local music festival.

Coaching

Educating students to have high, challenging, appropriate expectations is among the most powerful influences in enhancing student achievement (Hattie, 2009). The goal of coaching is to support the learner's ability to transfer their learning autonomously and effectively to new situations.

Rossville's enhanced pedagogical framework emphasised coaching as a powerful pedagogy. A suite of tools was developed to enable teachers to effectively

conference with students to analyse their own reading, writing and maths data to identify areas for future development. Together, student and teacher set specific goals to project manage the way to achievement. Goals are shared with parents and homework is differentiated for each child so that they work towards their goal.

To embed coaching across the school, teachers participated in peer observations and reflection to enhance proficiency in executing all elements of the pedagogical framework. Then, they set a goal with the Principal and activate strategies to project manage the way forward. The Professional Learning Plan is then differentiated for each staff member so that everyone has access to professional development tailored towards their goals.

Confident, Connected and Creative Citizens

By the end of 2015, Rossville State School could demonstrate that student engagement and achievement had dramatically shifted and that students were indeed beginning to realise their vision to empower and engage as confident, connected and creative citizens.

Confident

Students grow academic confidence when they acquire the skills they need to succeed. Targeted intervention had gone to making significant improvements in students who were already profoundly behind their State-mandated year level benchmarks. By the end of 2015, reported academic achievement had improved significantly. Report card data from semester 1, 2014 indicated that 23.1% of students were failing against the Australian Curriculum achievement standards. By the end of 2015, that number had been reduced by more than half to 9.3%.

Students achieving 2 or more years below year level benchmarks dramatically reduced from 4.7% to 0.7%.

Achievement on the NAPLAN tests also showed remarkable improvements, particularly in the areas of reading and numeracy. All students achieved above the national minimum standard in all areas of the tests in 2015. 50% of year 3 students achieve in the upper 2 bands (top levels of achievement) in both reading and numeracy. Year 5 students improved on average at 150% of the national average.

By opening up the curriculum beyond official literacy and numeracy basics and exposing students to more variety as well as promoting artistic and, most importantly, cultural knowledge and participation, students actually demonstrated greater improvement in literacy and numeracy. Moreover, a more equitable delivery of the Australian curriculum was achieved to give students a world class 21st century education in one of the most remote locations in the state.

Connected

Initiatives such as Cultural Connections and National Aboriginal and Islander Day Organising Committee (NAIDOC) implemented resulted in a dramatic decrease in behaviour incidents and continuous improvement in attendance rates. Attendance rates in particular improved steadily with the school coming within half a percent of the state average attendance for the first time since attendance data have been recorded and analysed system wide. Of particular note, unexplained absences have fallen to zero as solid relationships built on trust have been established with every family in the school. This is particularly the case with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Creative

There has been an explosion of creativity at Rossville State School. Students are continuously working creatively in their arts electives evidenced by student showcases of the latest examples of their visual and performing arts weekly at parade (assembly) or shown off in the community. Much of the evidence of this aspect of the school program can be seen in the physical environs, with Indigenous motifs and stylistic touches prominently on display.

Conclusion

From the brief notes above regarding recent significant pedagogical and curricular development at Rossville State School, a number of potent strategies and tactics utilized in effecting a more culturally respectful and life world enhancing approach to the formal schooling aspect of the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples specifically, but for all students more generally, might be identified. In summary, the remoteness of the school, frequently seen as perhaps carrying more problems than advantages, has in this case allowed the school and its community to develop a quite individual approach to the educational operations of the school. Being “off the beaten track” geographically as well as culturally, the school has been able to conceptualize and put into practice and approach to education that, whilst acknowledging the administrative necessity to work within the NAPLAN framework and to use reporting language attendant upon this [statistics, mean, behind, average, etc.] is also able to “fly under the radar” sufficiently to enable pedagogical innovation to gestate and develop relatively unhindered by external administrative visits, etc.

The physical remoteness has also tended to support something of a more enclosed epistemological and pedagogical hybridization, with “traditional” and colonizer cultures being intertwined as much as possible in the formal school curriculum. For Indigenous students at the school, the everyday visibility, acceptance, and celebration of their home cultures, including teaching of aspects of these cultures to all students [Indigenous and non-Indigenous] through language programs, the creative/arts emphasis, performance work, and aspects of science and history, marks one fairly significant step towards a reconciliation of a bifurcated life world—Home culture and Western culture. Such a recognition of the utter complexity of being “multi-cultural” is a major contribution towards cultural, emotional, and physical well-being for individuals and communities. There is no doubt that the elders of the local Indigenous communities connected to the school see their children developing competencies in formal Western schooling competencies as essential. But they are equally as determined to ensure that “home” cultural learning also is accorded value, time, and attention in the school curriculum. It is in this area that, in many ways, pedagogical developments of Rossville State School seem to be, at least in the short term, working to narrow the space between remoteness from dominant culture and the immediacy of Home cultures. From this perspective, *Closing the Gap* assumes a far more palatable and transformational meaning. The educators working in this school appeared to be assuming positions close to what Kincheloe and Steinberg (2008, p. 139) described as critical multi-logical educators: *critical multilogical teachers begin to look at lessons from the perspectives of individuals from different race, class, gender, and sexual orientations ... they are dedicated to the search for new perspectives.*

To sum up, instances such as Rossville State School and its community provide encouraging signs of the ongoing incubation of possibilities for and the evolution of critical pedagogies and education in remote regions, where an essential concern is to ensure the place of the local [culturally and geographically] in the face of continuing engulfment by the systemic

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