

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Systemic racism, a prime minister, and the remote Australian school system

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BUILDING A MOVEMENT, NOT JUST A MOMENT BY THEA GAHR VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

The Remote Context

Remote Australian schools face complex contextual issues due to systemic and enduring disadvantage. Rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures¹ persist. However, in remote spaces, with deep privileging of anglophone culture, the structures and systems put in place to support and provide *advantage* for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continually fail to meet their mark. Australian education is a colonial structure, originated in the late 1800s, following, largely, colonial British schooling patterns (Tregenza, 1996). As with Australia's universities, its schools were not prioritized by early colonial government (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2020). The priority afforded to schools in Australia's remote and rural regions has not substantially shifted since colonization, despite successive government gestures towards innovation, renovation, and support. While schools are, now, under governmental authority and considered public institutions, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'schools' and Christian missions of recent history in Australia are still in contemporary memory. Indeed, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the relatively recent acts of colonial government still sit 'front of mind', and inform their relationships with governmental authorities (Read, 2020; Schaffer, 2002; Terszak, 2015). In South Australia, the context of this paper, systemic disadvantage still disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in regional areas this increases by distance from major cities, affecting health, education, and policy decisions (Coory et al., 2013; Gething, 1997; Guenther, 2013b; Hunter, 2008; Minutjukur et al., 2014). Remote Australian schools, bound in this context of vast distance from major cities, relatively difficult access to services, and systemic racism, privileging and disadvantage create unique conditions for young people's educations. From the specific disadvantage of Australian colonialism and structural racism, issues of teaching and learning in remote contexts proliferate (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Lloyd et al., 2015). This article explores the contemporary colonial landscape of a remote school context, provides background on the colonial institutions which shape the interactions and services provided to people in remote Australian areas, and provides two empirical examples of the contemporary, structural, and harmful influence of policy and political figures in a remote school. By examining the politics of being a school leader, the policy background for remote Australian schools, and the unique challenges of *position* both in policy and physical terms, we show how contemporary racism structures and conditions the lives of young people in remote contexts today.

In remote South Australia, more than 800 km from Adelaide, lies a dusty red town, a formerly booming mining community, colonized in 1915 and situated on the lands of the Antakirinja, Matu, and Yankunytjatjara people. Here rich quantities of opal were found buried in the earth, attracting great numbers of white men with the prospect of fast riches. The countryside is now pock marked with thousands of open mine shafts, abandoned as the international price of opals diminished, and mining prospects dwindled. In this region only one school stands, a comprehensive preschool to year 12 school, situated in the heart of a town carrying a

government classification of 'very remote'. The student population includes over 65% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, some local, but families also from central Australia, rural and urban areas. The remaining student body comes largely from diverse Eastern and Western European and Asian backgrounds. Almost 75% of students are eligible for government financial assistance for school costs, based on parental income. The school's distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA), as classified by the Australian Government's MySchool website (ACARA, 2017), points to a very low Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), situating 80% of the population on the lowest quartile and 1% on the highest. Against this backdrop of widespread poverty, the staff reflected on the percentages of students dealing with trauma, grief, and health issues, and thought that this was the vast majority (Field notes) (Hickling-Hudson, 2004; Lalvani, 2013).

Research Methods

While principal of the school from 2017 to 2019, one author employed interpretive methods in support of an autoethnography, drawing on three years of lived remote school experience. The research was inspired by commitment to curriculum justice for students and agency for teachers (Connell, 2013; Reid, 2003; Smyth, 2001). Based on accepted ethnographic field work practices, such as journaling/field notes and audio diary, the researcher undertook reflexive self-study (Belbase et al., 2013; Denzin, 2014). In addition, interviews were conducted with other school leaders, post- their employment at the school, to avoid ethical and possible power relations conflicts (Spradley, 1979; Yeo et al., 2014). Documents and policies were examined using discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Krzyżanowski, 2011). The research was conducted with ethics approval from Flinders University (SBREC Approval 7996). The authors here reproduce and examine selected excerpts of the data to provide insights into the lived experience of those engaged in leading and teaching in this remote context, providing them with a voice.

A New School Leader – Learning One's Way In

Beginning a tenure as a school leader is challenging in any context, and finding the best way to lead within the setting, crucial (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). Listening is more important than telling (Back, 2007). Meeting the community, listening to as many voices as possible is always an excellent starting point (Macdonald et al., 2016).

The school community greeted me with a chorus of, 'How long are you here miss?' and an outpouring of grievances and disappointments. Some of these messages came quietly on doorsteps, others at volume in my office. Arriving as the seventh principal in five years, unsurprisingly, it was made clear there was little faith in the education system and that there were wide ranging and competing demands. I was met with little hope that anything would change (Leader's journal reflection, 2017).

Staffing challenges and human resource policies paid lip service to the enormity of life and work in such a remote setting. When the new school leader arrived, the staff was made up of local community members, largely in temporary support roles, and mostly early career teachers seeking permanent positions, and a leadership team in their first ever leadership roles (Hickling-Hudson, 2004). The deepest experience was situated with locals casually employed as support staff. Graduate teachers, many away from home for the first time, needed more than rent subsidy and a remote allowance to find their way in a complex and demanding site, faced with conflict and contradictory needs².

For the principal/researcher, one obvious gap on arrival was the lack of shared understanding of the school's direction. South Australia's Department for Education uses triannual school reviews as a key element to monitoring school improvement, progress, and outcomes and provides advice on future directions (Department for Education, 2020). As part of the review process, *at risk* schools are allocated as 'one-year-return', meaning that the external school review process occurred annually. The new leader's office held review reports from three previous annual reviews. Each report outlined recommendations based on insights garnered during fly-in/fly-out overnight visits. Some 19 recommendations outlined improvement directions to be implemented by a group of largely graduate teachers, struggling to build their craft and establish themselves in the context and overwhelmed by the complexity of their classrooms. A case was made that the insights of an experienced leader on the ground were ultimately going to be more valuable than the planned 2017 review that would bring additional recommendations. Agreement came from state office, creating space for prioritization based on a deepening understanding of individual student's learning needs (Connell, 2013). Extensive staff, student, and community consultation led to the creation of a collectively owned improvement plan with strategies to address the huge literacy gaps, adopt trauma informed practices, and strengthen cultural input into the curriculum.

We'd started work on our collaboratively developed and 'owned' improvement plan when, in 2018, I sat with hundreds of colleagues, all government school principals from across South Australia, in a huge auditorium, to hear the minister for education and chief executive's annual addresses. We were regaled with the positive outcomes of some of the new government's initiatives, a litany of issues still to be addressed and a promise of improvement to come. Both spoke of a new approach to improvement, as if the audience, many with decades of leadership experience, had never considered that improvement might be a good idea. That leaders and teachers hadn't been constantly working to improve school's processes, student experience and learning outcomes would be a safe assumption to make, given the tone of the presentations. September, we were promised, all would be revealed (Leader's journal reflection, 2018).

Inevitably, politicians expect constituents to attend to what is working well, to join them in the celebration of their impact, based on the *evidence* they present (Feldman, 2021; Geys & Mause, 2018). And yet, in return, this positive

orientation is rarely seen from politicians when seeking to identify the *source* of problems. Inevitably the blame for policy failures, in the education arena, is placed with teachers, schools, or communities (Feldman, 2021; Vass, 2012). Among other things, the leaders' day speech themes included: falling literacy and numeracy levels, as evidenced by national testing regimes and international assessment rankings, appalling data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes, and the need to 'fix' these problems and become a 'world class system' (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

Typical political rhetoric can be seen in a 2018 report in the statewide newspaper, *The Advertiser*, where former Australian Prime Minister, Mr. Abbott, told parliament that amid the 'generally depressing' indicators on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia, one factor stood out: 'Indigenous³ people who finish school and who do complete a degree have much the same employment outcomes and life expectancies as other comparable Australians. It stands to reason that to have a decent life you've got to have a job, and to have a job you've got to have a reasonable education' (Holderhead, 2018, para. 12). Guenther (2013a) challenges the description of remote education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as *problematic, failing, intractable*, and 'in terms of gaps that need closing' (p. 2). In fact, the data is not problematic. The challenge is the application of a western lens to the data and the deficit thinking this brings about (Fogarty et al., 2018). Many students *failing* in literacy assessments have a language background other than English, yet they are judged and found wanting as if their primary language is English. Similarly, the expectation that schools have *failed* and need to improve comes from the application of a narrow set of measures deeply embedded in colonialism (Bishop et al., 2021; Strakosch, 2019). This was to become even more evident in the implementation of the new improvement process announced in September that year.

As promised, in September 2018, schools received a package of improvement materials (Department for Education, 2019a) - 'focused and deep' was the mantra. New plans were to be created on a predetermined template (Department for Education, 2020). Each school was allocated a level of improvement, based on a complex algorithm that considered national literacy and numeracy test results and centrally held data sets. The levels of improvement had 5 stages: from the lowest, 'build foundations', through 'shift gear', 'stretch', 'maintain momentum', and 'inspire'. The allocated stage dictated school improvement priorities and strategies. Concomitantly the creep of corporate discourses have reframed the thinking about what *improvement* might look like, focussing on narrow indicators of 'success' rooted in neoliberalism (Connell, 2013). A leadership team meeting, called to discuss these 'new' expectations included a comment, 'No prizes for guessing which stage we're at. Of course: building foundations' (Field notes). This was the same for most very remote, remote, regional, and rural schools. Principals were instructed by the chief executive and minister for education to create a new improvement plan that was to reflect the required strategies in the allocated level. Drafts were due

in 5 weeks, to be scrutinized by the local education team before being submitted to central office.

Overnight, all schools' collaboratively developed improvement plans were to be put aside. Despite most schools already using improvement planning principles that included consultation, professional conversations about needs and directions, learning needs assessments, reference to literature, and making informed choices for their own context, existing improvement plans were to be replaced. The new plan was expected to implement predetermined strategies based on the school's allocated level and within timeframes too short for consultation. The school leader's reflection at the end of this first round of plan production follows:

What was to evolve over was a singular focus on each school's implementation of the allocated level's improvement strategies. No-one outside the school would entertain the idea that there were likely to be different priorities in schools like ours. Not the local education director with many years connected to remote schools, not the improvement support officers sent to provide the required professional learning, not the review teams sent to monitor improvement. Insistence that the actions were right, they had been researched after all, became the closed door to any local initiatives and ideas about what engaged the most vulnerable of learners or that responded to the voices of Indigenous Elders⁴ and cultural priorities. Staff described the new improvement processes as silencing their voices and the imperatives as demanding compliance. The one-size-fits-all approach, accompanied by an expectation that the answers sat with people outside the school had just begun (Field notes).

Since 2020, the next principal has fully adopted the department expectations, to the extent that the only teaching strategies allowed are those in the Improvement Guide Books (Government of South Australia, 2018). A leader shared their perspective on this blind compliance with department directives:

A third of the school day is assigned to explicit literacy instruction and a third to explicit numeracy instruction. Everyone participating together. It leaves little time for accommodating different needs, cultural learning or even the other six learning areas in the Australian Curriculum. No other innovations are allowed. Guest speakers and alternate programs are seen as distractions from the mandated core business, the improvement guide books (Interview data).

In their introduction, the guidebooks claim they 'support school improvement planning processes by providing leaders with a limited menu of evidence-informed literacy and numeracy practices aimed at improving learner growth and achievement' (Government of South Australia, 2018). Nowhere is there a written edict that the strategies in the guidebooks are the only thing that should be taught. Yet many staff in schools, especially rural, remote, and those in low socioeconomic settings, describe expectations from their education directors and visiting support staff that they comply with the guidebooks.

In their submission to the Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, Guenther and Ober (2017) point out that success and the purpose of schooling are not necessarily the same in our most remote schools as they are in urban contexts. The application of one-size-fits-all approaches does little to meet the diverse needs of learners (Dillon, 2019; Guenther, 2013a). We contend that this applies to all contexts but is noticeably evident in the very remote areas of Australia. Having explored the impact of government improvement planning policies, we now turn attention to exploration of policy responses to school attendance, challenges and lost opportunities.

Conflicting Approaches to Improving Attendance

Attendance is a unique challenge in remote schools. As indicated in the earlier quote from former Prime Minister, Mr. Abbott, schooling is a 'pathway to success'. However, this success is identified from an anglophone standpoint and is in need of cautionary attention (Bishop et al., 2021; Burgess & Lowe, 2019; Daniels-Mayes, 2017; Strakosch, 2019). There is not a singular reason for poor school attendance (Dillon, 2019; Dreise et al., 2016; Vinson et al., 2015). Poor attendance was historical and over the five years leading up to the principal/researcher's arrival, had been in decline (Departmentally held data)⁵. Many reasons for low school attendance are intractable and often outside a school's remit. A few examples include: family members not having had a successful experience of schooling, and resultant long-term unemployment, low literacy and numeracy skills, and a lower value being put on school attendance (Comber, 2011). This meant that many students did not have working family members as role models, and did not experience the boundaries, routines, and understandings that this brings. The prevalence of drug and alcohol problems and domestic violence, their impacts on children, and the considerable number of older children taking up care responsibilities are also significant factors on attendance. Conversations with parents brought to light the issue of unwillingness to 'let go' of younger students so that they could attend school. Often children did not attend school regularly until 12-18 months after their peers and they were then faced with daunting academic and experience gaps to close.

Government responses to attendance improvement have had variable impact (Dillon, 2019; Dreise et al., 2016). Political deputations to consult and understand attendance (and other) issues occur frequently. Late in 2018, a former Prime Minister visited the remote town at the center of this article, as part of his 'special envoy' parliamentary role, to address attendance issues in remote schools. This visit was planned to *help* schools (and other services) in remote locations. The irony of yet another white man arriving to help was not missed by many. As with all *visits*, time on the ground was limited and, in this case, carefully managed by Commonwealth education policy and media staff. In the days leading up to the visit, organizational emails and phone calls dominated the workload of leaders. The imperative of preparing the visit hosts was apparent. At the same time, staff were engaged in a 'school clean up', to put a 'shiny new face on the school for the important visitor' (Interview data).

The attitude that one can visit, see, hear, and decide on behalf of others is institutionalized in Australia. Whiteness is the 'norm' and is privileged in practice and policies (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Durey & Thompson, 2012; Stanley et al., 2003). This visit was cloaked in *making a difference to attendance* messages. On 10/9/2018 Holderhead reported in *The Advertiser* that former Prime Minister, Mr. Abbott, acting as a 'special envoy', was given authority to function as 'a fierce independent advocate for indigenous (sic) education'. The news report goes on to say that the special envoy would not be 'hamstrung by government policy' and that the current Prime Minister, Mr. Morrison, was expecting Mr. Abbott to 'engage across communities affected by poor school attendance' and provide 'an honest assessment of where things are at' and present 'game changers' to cabinet (Holderhead, 2018, para. 3,5).

Political strategy, detached from the lived reality of those being 'managed', is often disconnected. Having little warning of the upcoming visit, there was not time for community agencies and the school to discuss strategy or hear each other's ideas, to create shared priorities or understand and support others' views. The visit then, was disjointed and not strategically managed. Different, and at times contradictory, perspectives were offered at each stop, according to an accompanying federal government 'staffer' as the delegation left town (Field notes).

The school's leadership team had a long conversation, the night before the visit, as a last-minute attempt to gain some strategic leverage. Their prepared speaking notes included the school's perspective on roadblocks to attendance and recommendations. The team was conscious that their recommendations be framed by recognition of privilege, as they were increasingly aware that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students railed against practices and expectations they saw as assimilation (Daniels-Mayes, 2017; Daniels-Mayes et al., 2019). There was a distinct power imbalance in this analysis and the staff understood that they needed to be mindful of and review their own beliefs and practices (Bishop et al., 2021; Durey & Thompson, 2012).

With experience, consultation, implementation, and systematic reflection, on what worked and did not, staff developed confidence about useful strategies in their remote context:

The agreement with community members and Elders that learning to read was a valuable skill had made a positive difference to attendance. No matter how badly school was perceived, or the pathway young people might take, like traditional life or tertiary education ... we think most families got how important reading is and were willing to send their children to school for this (Interview data).

The staff learned the importance of relationships with Elders and leaders in the community and the need to develop partnerships with the local community services. These relationships contributed to greater understanding of the local community, and helped to establish the relevance of the school in this community (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Fogarty et al., 2018, 2018).

The school's first improvement plan, developed the year before, was solidly built on data and consultation. School data suggested that at least 200 of the 240+ students required additional literacy support. Extensive work was done to increase the effectiveness of classroom literacy instruction, but with a low starting point, progress was slow. One new Year 8 teacher described her dilemma, illustrating the challenges teachers faced. She arrived at the school with the expectation that secondary students could read and that they read to learn. Instead, she explained, 'I have three students on track for university. Five others are doing okay. The other 16 cannot read what I write on the board or hand out to them. I just don't know where to start' (Field notes). All were taught in one classroom as a whole group, by mostly early career teachers learning their craft. Innovative approaches to curriculum delivery, with pairs of teachers working in cross disciplinary subjects, were implemented to address the 'seeming impossibility of differentiating across ten or more years of skill development in a single classroom' (Interview data).

Delayed literacy skill development was identified by staff as a major contributor to uneven attendance (Lloyd et al., 2015). To address this, the school used more than their allocated resources to employ local staff to help. Locals with expertise were recruited into permanent positions and learned literacy teaching skills alongside the new teachers. They worked one-to-one and with small groups to provide the explicit support many students needed. The highly celebrated success of one 10-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student was a 'game changer'. Bobby (pseudonym) had learned to read in 18 months of almost daily attendance, receiving one-on-one reading instruction every time he attended. Images of him with two novels under each arm, a proud reader, reached many thousand Facebook users on the school's account, drawing comments from over 500 relatives, community members, and supporters. What was obvious, was that the more success Bobby experienced, the keener he was to be at school. Building momentum and willingness of others to participate required success stories. This early breakthrough, provided a mentor for younger students struggling to read, evidence that it was possible, and gave Bobby a much-needed leadership role in the community (Field notes). The school's learnings about 'success building on success' aligned with Guenther and Ober's (2017) findings that outcomes for remote students are improving but success 'should be recognized in its own right - not always in comparison with urban Australians' (p. 4).

Despite the pressure to conform with the new improvement priorities previously described, staff continued to focus on goals established for each individual student and to respect community wishes for their children. Experience had shown staff that early intervention was the most effective process in realizing the previous year's 'Everybody reads' goal. In just one year, 17 of the 23 students in the junior primary reading intervention program closed the gap to 'age-appropriate' or better reading levels. Over 2 years, there was a 500% increase in the number of 5- to 13-year-olds reading competently (School data). This was an expensive, staff intensive process, with students needing daily small group and one-to-one, skilled and tailored

support, and the staff were keen to share these successes with the special envoy.

In remote areas, access to teaching and support staff, skilled in this work, required careful recruitment and extensive training. With 30-50% annual staff turnover, training and replacing qualified staff was an ongoing expense and priority (School data). It was not just a case of recruiting a teacher, as Guenther and Ober (2017) point out; the qualities a teacher needs in a remote location are not necessarily those required in urban schools. Willingness to live remotely, cultural and context responsiveness, and a high degree of reflexivity were excellent starting points. As the staff learned about processes and tailored support that worked, insights came more quickly, and successes followed.

Staff recognized that success with these strengths-based, tailored interventions was accompanied by increased attendance. The school leadership team identified the 'pull' potential of success and prepared to share literacy strategies and other observations about actions that were acting to 'pull' and improve attendance with the special envoy. Under the visiting ex-prime minister's 5-year, remote school's attendance program, multiple millions of dollars were spent on buses, drivers, lunches, incentives, and other strategies to 'push' students into school. This was always destined to fail if teachers were not adequately prepared – quality pedagogy, ability to differentiate across enormous skill differences, cultural responsiveness, and inclusive approaches were essential (Casey et al., 2016; Fogarty et al., 2015; Fogarty & Schwab, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2015). Many extraordinary efforts to bring children into the school fell over within days, if not hours, if teachers were unable, unready, or unwilling to engage in practices that ensured engagement (Interview data). 'Falling over' looked different in almost every case. On occasions it was as simple as a highly anxious student leaving the classroom when not the given the required stationery (Field notes). Support staff were assigned to accompany returning and new students to manage the transition into classrooms to address this issue. The school supported all staff to understand that using language that is judgmental or which someone does not understand creates a power imbalance (Jennings et al., 2018). Most staff understood that minimizing the power differential showed care and respect, but some new to the context, overwhelmed by the remoteness and complexity or less reflexive, found this challenging. It took one verbal slip to see a vulnerable student walk out of the school.

Where teachers learned culturally appropriate practices, accessed curriculum designed for Aboriginal learners, built relationships, and connected with students over time, there were dramatic increases in attendance and, in parallel, learning outcomes. The progress and achievements were described to the special envoy, in the hope that some of his discretionary funding might be redirected to allocate the time required for staff to learn their way into the school, community, and culture. Effective professional learning is responsive to each staff member's challenges and goals, not a pre-packaged set of materials (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020; Dinham, 2013). Again, the turnover in staff meant that this was not an easy fix. It required ongoing attention and time, intensively for

new recruits and developmentally for ongoing staff, but its 'pull' potential was clear.

Teachers reported that their best cultural learning happened with Elders in the classroom with their students. The approaches, strategies, and knowledge used by community members and Elders could be drawn upon and connected to the classroom. Volunteer run sessions were well received but were not prioritized by community members with busy lives to live, with jobs and other commitments. Higher attendance was recorded each time there was a cultural learning experience. A useful 'pull' attendance strategy would have increased the budget to pay community members or to access more local staff. The policy requiring police screening, for suitability to work with children, was a necessary but challenging roadblock to several school and community initiatives. As teachers participated in professional learning and joined community run sessions, their cultural understanding, pedagogic skills, and reflexivity improved. The most successful teachers were more critically aware of their own culture and could honestly reflect on their own biases and prejudices and how they interact with the world (Bennett et al., 2011; Green & Baldry, 2008). This awareness enabled genuine curiosity, openness, and willingness to learn more about the cultures of others, and not surprisingly, made classrooms safer for all students (Bishop et al., 2021; Casey et al., 2016).

Trials of small group, Aboriginal Languages instruction proved highly engaging and effective in attendance 'pull'. With more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken on this continent prior to colonization and around half of those languages still accessible, the decision to introduce an Aboriginal language was not straight forward. The schools' Aboriginal staff had a variety of backgrounds, not necessarily connected to the local community, and not all were proficient in their own, let alone the local languages, nor skilled in teaching them. Finding appropriate providers was a challenge. While reading in English was important, we knew that using an Aboriginal language was a powerful connector for many students (Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther & Ober, 2017). Relocation expenses, accommodation support and remote site loadings were not available to casual staff. The level of financial resourcing to bring in language expertise or to engage community members was beyond the school's capacity. Without salary, training, and resources, community members could only provide short term experiences. Yet another place for the special envoy to fund a strategy that would 'help' increase attendance:

Pull looked quite different with older students who could be convinced that there was value in re-engaging with school, at least to learn to read. Many of these students had very little experience of classroom learning and few literacy skills. Often, they would be brought to school by the attendance team and walk into a classroom, only to leave almost immediately. Sadly, this process cemented prevalent 'school is not for me' beliefs and it was clear that something different was needed (Interview data).

With the support of federal representatives of the National Indigenous Australians Agency the school successfully established an Alternate Learning Centre (ALC).

Funding supported a new space, and staff dedicated to responding individually to older students' aspirations. Young people, like one 15-year-old Aboriginal student, Mark (Pseudonym), returned from men's cultural and ceremonial commitments keen to find a trade, and engaged in the ALC. This young man, like many, had attended school for a handful of days over the previous five years and was unable to read or to write his name. Every participant in the ALC had huge, but different academic gaps and many social, emotional, and health issues to overcome (Field notes). The ALC moved away from a classroom model, providing reading lessons one-on-one, support with life essentials -- for example obtaining driver's licenses or opening bank accounts -- on a 'drop in' and 'at need' basis and connected young people to community support services where possible. Many, including Mark, came frequently, usually for half an hour each day, and experienced academic success for the first time. Mark went on to successfully complete a welding course and a TAFE Barista certificate and found some work in a local café during tourist season. A 2020 independent review of the ALC highlighted its effectiveness as young people engaged with an intensive reading program, and were supported by skilled teachers, Commonwealth funded Aboriginal youth workers, and other community agencies, such as Aboriginal Family Support Services. Resource intensive, but the ALC was highly effective in engaging disenfranchised young people in learning. The message to the special envoy was one of individualized support, student-led goal setting, coordination of services for the therapeutic and educational to come together, and, most importantly, a commitment to ongoing funding. Changing funding priorities and ending programs had left many in the town with only short-term access to valuable support. The school staff were keen for the special envoy to value this federal support and continue it.

Another focus during discussions with the special envoy was employment opportunities, for local people, in the school and other government agencies. In recognition of government policy to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, the proposal was for funding of new ongoing positions, to support classroom teachers with cultural connections and language teaching.

Despite the school leaders' clear agenda, strategies that worked, and ways to make them happen, the special envoy was more interested in discussing his remote schools' attendance strategy than new insights from those in the field. The federally funded attendance strategy aimed to employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. There was agreement: 'That was great. Much needed in fact, as there were few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the town outside of Aboriginal organisations' (Interview data). The challenge was that little consideration was given to building the strategy staff's skills and understanding of the school or classroom context. In fact, the attendance team worked in an office across town. Another leader explained in his interview:

Not often in school, the team had little opportunity to share their skills, interests, and knowledge or to work shadow our team, or to inform us about stuff or learn along with our staff. We often couldn't reach them

because they had assigned jobs, set by outsiders, and did them in the office. ... Where it would have been impactful was to have them in the office every morning so teachers reported absences and one of the team could immediately contact the family to understand what was happening and, if needed, collect the child. We couldn't get this happening. So many missed opportunities (Interview data).

The one concession from the special envoy's visit was that a management committee was established. This did provide a forum for discussion about alternative ways of operating, but most often the funding criteria allowed little creativity or trialing of new ideas.

One's cynicism must be stirred when a senior politician can tell the school's leader that he knew there'd been little impact from *his* attendance program but that he would recommend its continuation (Field notes). There is an obvious incongruity between the 'green light to lift attendance' media discourse (Holderhead, 2018, para. 2), and the special envoy's understanding that the strategy had failed. On his return to Canberra, the continuation of the program was announced, with accompanying celebration of its successes across many media platforms.

After the visit, the leadership team involved in this special envoy visit met to consider what had been learned and achieved. The scant attention given to the undeniable data showing that attendance had decreased over the five years of his strategy was worrying. One asked skeptically, 'Did he help?' and another, 'Will he help?' Questions on everyone's lips (Field notes). Team members were appalled by this example of the superficial nature of contemporary political figures' agendas and priorities.

Conclusion

Policymakers and policy tend to 'assume the best possible environments' (Ball, 2021; Ball et al., 2011, p. 6). In illustrating the impact of neo-conservative policy, based on school improvement, and political agendas around attendance, this article has highlighted how blindness to the varied needs and priorities of students and community members in remote locations cannot be *fixed* from white perspectives, overnight visits, and externally generated *one-size-fits-all* solutions. By the end of their tenure, the staff from this site had a great deal of insight into the needs, ways of working, and approaches that could support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to successfully engage with western expectations. There remain questions about how systems, like the education department, can capture these insights to successfully support staff in remote contexts to be mindful of their privilege and willing to interrogate their assumptions, and avoid the use of deficit language. Prospective staff should be prepared for complexity, bring some knowledge of Australia's history, the impact of colonialism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's resistance to assimilation, and be willing to share power and set goals with individual students and their families. Also important are cultural curiosity and respect, and willingness to grow relationships with Elders

and community leaders and learn alongside students, valuing cultural learning as a learner and teacher.

To *fix* remote education, our education and broader systems must give up their one-size-fits-all solutions and narrow measures for the problems they *read* into data when using western perspectives and urban metrics. Blame is not helpful, and it is time to measure success, not in comparison to urban students. It is time to listen to local expertise, community and professional, and allow well trained and well-meaning staff to see, hear, and share decision making with the young people we all want the best for, and their families.

Notes

1. The authors wish to acknowledge the continuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care for country, their connection to lands and waters, and Elders past and present. This article was written on Kurna land, sovereignty for which was never ceded.

2. Indeed, while teachers themselves live with precarious employment, their teaching context is equally impacted by students' precarity (Dovemark & Beach, 2016; Walsh & Gleeson, 2021). This uncomfortable *being in* education creates felt effects across teachers, students, and community (Standing, 2014). Moreover, the cycles of precarity deeply impact the education systems through which pre-service teachers travel on their way to precarious employment (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021).

3. Australia's first people are referred to in several ways, some more acceptable than others in different regions. 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' has been identified as appropriate for this article, but voices used 'Indigenous'; this has not been changed. No offense is intended in the language chosen.

4. Elders refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples recognized as holders of local wisdom by their peers.

5. All government schools enter wide ranging data into a central repository. Children's information, family details, socio-economic details, local curriculum testing results, behaviour reports, disabilities information, and attendance are examples of data sets collected. Attendance is recorded daily, and historical data is accessible for decades.

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