Remote Education Systems

Project Update
December 2012

About the project

The Remote Education Systems project aims to find out how remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can get the best benefit from the teaching and learning happening in and out of schools. It is doing this by engaging with members of communities, schools, government agencies and other end users who want to find ways of improving outcomes for students in remote Australia.

Research questions

Research questions driving the project are as follows.

1) What is education for in remote Australia and what can/should it achieve?
2) What defines ‘successful’ educational outcomes from the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
3) How does teaching need to change in order to achieve ‘success’ as defined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoint?
4) What would an effective education system in remote Australia look like?

The ‘what for’ question underpins the other questions. The current system is built on assumptions that work well for most people in Australia—education is the pathway to getting a job or going on to further study. A key focus of the project will be to bring out the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in response to the questions—what does success look like and how can it be achieved to enhance opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful livelihoods. We are interested in innovative thinking that will help the system respond to local needs.

Who we work with: key stakeholders

We acknowledge the support and involvement of our key organisational stakeholders:

- Northern Territory Government Department of Education and Children’s Services;
- Western Australian Government Department of Education;
- South Australian Government Department of Education and Child Development;
- Nyangatjatjarra College
- Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
- NPY Women’s Council
- Charles Darwin University
- University of South Australia, including AnTEP
- Flinders University
- Central Land Council (through Walpiri Education and Training Trust)
- Menzies Centre for Child Development and Education
- Education Transformations
Research locations and activities

Sam Osborne is leading the work in the APY cluster. He recently conducted a training workshop for Aboriginal Community Researchers at Yulara. Anangu researchers are on the ground in a number of communities across the region conducting community perception surveys. They are working closely with Anangu schools in South Australia and the Nyangatjatjara College campuses in Imanpa, Mutitjulu and Docker River. Data from these surveys will form a valuable part of the baseline. A community researcher has also been trained to do similar work at Santa Teresa.

Melodie Bat is leading the research effort in Walpiri schools. Melodie has been recently gathering data from the Lajamanu community and has also been working closely with the Yuendumu school with a view to gathering data there early in 2013.

John Guenther has been leading the project work in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Here the focus has been on supporting a school-based research agenda throughout 2012. The intent is to develop a professional learning community across the site. He has worked with staff to compile a database to capture school-level outcomes data.

Melodie Bat is working with Kimberley Catholic Education schools in Beagle Bay and Derby to support Assistant Teachers with research projects as part of their Diploma in Education Support with Batchelor Institute.

The Arnhem Land site is led by John Guenther. Work here is focused on developing local capacity. The project recently supported a community governance workshop which was led by an experienced local community educator.

Secondary data analysis

NAPLAN data. A database of very remote schools, extracted from the MySchool website has been created and the data analysed. The next release of the data is due in February 2013, which will allow us to track trends over 5 years.

School-level data. Data from a selection of schools in Western Australia and the Northern Territory is now available and being analysed.

2011 Census data. Progressive release of all Census datasets is being used to analyse specific education related statistics for remote Australia.

Value-adding projects

The following are small value-adding projects that have been negotiated and will commence in Term I of 2013 subject to ethical clearance.

A project with the Arlparrra School, in the Northern Territory is planning to support Assistant Teachers gather stories and perceptions about education in the Utopia region.

FAST (Families and Schools Together) is program run across the Northern Territory designed to enhance school-family linkages. In Alice Springs it has been conducted at the Gillen School for two years. The research aims to find out what the sustained impacts of the program are.
Students

Philip Townsend, Flinders University is in his first year of full time PhD study, based in Adelaide. His research interests are in the area of using technology for professional development of remote Aboriginal educators.

Patricia Burke, Flinders University is in her first year of part time PhD study, based in the Ngaaanyatjarra Lands of Western Australia, where she is currently a teacher. Her research interests are in the area of culturally inclusive curriculum, drawing on input from community members.

We still have space for one more post-graduate student to be enrolled through CDU and another to be enrolled through Flinders. We would like to fill these positions early in 2013. In addition, we have opportunities for two vocational or vacation students who may be interested in a short term project.

7 key learnings so far

1. Resourcing for remote schools/teacher preparation/professional development has never been better

There has been considerable effort from governments to address resourcing issue—COAG National Partnerships, National Alliance for Remote Indigenous Schools, Stronger Smarter Institute are among the many initiatives designed to address disadvantage and ‘close the gap’.

2. Community voice in remote education needs to be heard

While much of the effort has gone into provisioning the supply side of education, not so much has gone into working with communities to support or shape community ownership of education. The need for community-based research is paramount.

3. Aspiration and vision for the future for young people needs to be given priority

It is evident that one of the key reasons for young people not engaging in schooling is their own choice.

4. What we currently measure in terms of student learning may lead to false conclusions

Schooling ≠ learning: there is sometimes an assumption that children need to be in school in order to learn. The real issue is that teachers can’t teach if children don’t attend.

5. Carrot and stick approaches to improving outcomes don’t necessarily work in remote contexts

What may work to improve outcomes in urban/regional/rural contexts doesn’t necessarily work in remote contexts; e.g. SEAM initiative appears to work in urban communities but not in many remote communities.

6. Systems tend to inhibit creative innovation more than promote it

There is a lot of incremental ‘school improvement’ happening, but few examples of truly ‘disruptive’ innovation, that sit outside the square of the classroom walls.

7. Nationalised approaches for curriculum, assessment, teacher professional standards can be at odds with the contextual demands of remote education

National approaches may reinforce feelings of failure among students as well as teachers which may not be warranted.
Publications, presentations, workshops

The Remote Education Systems project has been represented in the following recent events. The RES team have actively promoted research learnings at a number of strategic events, including

- The International Rural Network Forum, held at Whyalla, South Australia
- Australian Education Union, Alice Springs Aboriginal Education Seminar
- North Australian Research Unit (NARU) Public Seminar Series, Darwin.
- AusAID Delivering Better Education Services Workshop, Canberra.
- Flinders University, Points of Connection, Collaborative Remote Research event.

A full list of presentations and publications can be found at http://crc-rep.com/remote-education-systems/project-documents

How can we support you?

The RES project team is keen to support our key stakeholders and engage with other potential partners in a number of ways: Post-graduate scholarship opportunities; Vacation and vocational student scholarships; Sharing our learnings in seminars and workshops; Support for post-graduate students; and Collaborative research. If you would like to work with us in one of these ways, or just want more information, contact John Guenther, email john.guenther@flinders.edu.au or phone him on 0412 125 661.

Opportunities for collaborative work

The strategic advantage of working collaboratively in the remote education space is being recognised through:

- Ninti One’s access to a network of schools in remote parts of Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia
- Access to a network of community researchers ready to work on projects in remote communities across the region
- A unique understanding of the remote Australian context
- Connections with a range of CRC-REP projects: mining, tourism, cultural enterprise, plant business, pathways to employment (VET sector), health and well-being and more...
- A recognition that the remote education research space is an under-researched field with more questions than answers.

Contacts

If you have questions about anything in this update, please contact any of the senior researchers listed below.

John Guenther, 0412 125 661 john.guenther@flinders.edu.au
Melodie Bat, 0427 226 561, melodie.bat@cdu.edu.au
Sam Osborne, 0408 719 939, sam.osborne@nintione.com.au

We acknowledge our university partners, Charles Darwin University, Flinders University and University of South Australia.