Restoring Curriculum Entitlement …the First Step in Climbing the Educational Mountain for Indigenous Students in Remote Schools

Dr Robyn Hewitson
Post Doctoral Research Fellow
Charles Darwin University

Telephone: 08 8941 6808
Mobile: 0423 729460
Email: rhewitson@bigpond.com

32 Ah Mat Street
Woolner, NT 0820
INTRODUCTION

It is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls upon our troubles and our suffering and that we decide that these are unbearable.

(Sartre, 1956, pp.434-435)

Historic Change at Kalkaringi

During the period from late 2001-2005, historic events unfolded in a remote school for Indigenous students located around 480 kilometres southwest of Katherine in the Northern Territory. The creation, development and implementation of an innovative, controversial and challenging educational programme culminated in Northern Territory’s first Indigenous students successfully completing their Year 12 studies from their home community. Each of the students subsequently gained successful entry into an Australian University based on their academic scores rather than relying on their Aboriginality. This heralded a new chapter in the history of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory.

Kalkaringi School and its surrounding Gurindji communities of Kalkaringi and Daguragu became the sites, in which hopeful images of a fairer and more equitable education were nourished despite impoverished beginnings, and a pedagogy of hope established the foundation on which “a social and educational vision of justice and equality” (Kincheloe, 2004, p.6) was born and enacted by the educational stakeholders within those communities. Just as the past generation of Gurindji camped at Wave Hill, had played a vital role in the struggle for equal pay for equal work, and Indigenous land rights, once again they found themselves with ground-breaking decisions to make, this time about the education of their children.
On Wednesday, 18 June 2003, Federal member for Lingiari, Mr Warren Snowden contributed the following to the ongoing discussion in the Parliamentary House of Representatives regarding Indigenous education in the Northern Territory. He said:

_In the Northern Territory there are 45,000 children of school age. Of these, 38 per cent - or roughly 17,000 – are Indigenous. Importantly ... around 5,000 of those 17,000 have no access to either a decent primary or secondary school. In fact, there has never been a graduate – not one - at year 12 level of any bush school in the Northern Territory. This year, however, there are four young Indigenous students and one non-Indigenous student at Kalkaringi in year 12... (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p.16944)_

The eventual success of the students mentioned in Hansard in completing their Northern Territory Certificate of Education (NTCE) set in motion expectations from other remote Indigenous communities that they would each be able to access a similar quality of educational programme, and indeed demanded from the Northern Territory government immediate action to ensure that their children be able to achieve similar goals.

Meanwhile, at Kalkaringi and Daguragu, the students, teachers, school community, and families celebrated their historic achievement, and the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET) and the government of the day were delighted that history was beginning to change for the better. Kalkaringi School was termed, by the then Minister of Employment, Education and Training in the Northern Territory Government, Mr Syd Stirling, “a school of high significance – not just locally, but also on a national level” (Stirling, 2005).
Despite these celebrations, no significant attempt was undertaken by the Northern Territory Government or its education department throughout the four year period to understand or make sense of what transpired in that remote community, beyond collecting some basic quantitative data involving attendance and achievement levels in the senior years. Instead, increasing attention was focused on promoting the historic achievements in a range of ways including the production of the highly successful 24-minute documentary by filmmakers Craig Danvers and Simon Manzie entitled “From Little Things Big Things Grow” co-produced by Darwin-based production company Simon Says Television and NT DEET. It premiered in Darwin in February 2004. The documentary was a finalist in the United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Awards 2004 and the Australian Best Television Category. The documentary featured three of the young Gurindji students at Kalkaringi who were the subject of the Mr Snowden’s speech in Parliament.

The promotion of the educational success from the Wave Hill community was vitally important in providing new hope and vision about what was possible in remote community schooling for the wider Australian and international community, however, uncovering the particular theoretical framework that underpinned the evolving ethos of Kalkaringi school and its educational programmes, without which the achievements would not have been possible, seemed of little importance to outsiders.

Without examining how and why educational history was changed at Kalkaringi, the government’s capacity to harness and systematise the emerging and productive pedagogies from Kalkaringi, remained inhibited throughout that period of time. It should
be noted that there were significant departmental policy impediments, which I will discuss more fully later in the paper, that were in place that officially prevented remote schools in the Northern Territory from exploring and accessing a fuller educational entitlement, however, there appeared to be little interest in, or incentive to push the existing policy boundaries. Based on the nature of the policies in place, there was evidence of deep entrenchment by government, educational bureaucracy and even in the academic arena that “differential provision” of curriculum and educational growth was a culturally appropriate response to the challenge of educating remote Indigenous students, as well as an assessment of Indigenous students as a homogenous group in which the students had limited academic potential.

“Differential provision” was a term from John Coons (1970) that Jonathon Kozol cited in *Savage Inequalities* (1991, p.207) to explain why some students “in the economic race are hobbled at the gate”, while others, situated in different circumstances, enjoy a more “preferential education” (Kozol, 1991, p.207) with a full day’s education made up of a time-balanced and knowledge-broad curriculum.

From late 2001, Kalkaringi School leadership involving the newly appointed Principal, the newly established Ngumpin Coordinator, other school leaders and the School Council devised a radical approach which took issue with Kalkaringi School’s current educational circumstances and the policies that governed its educational delivery.

This paper attempts to briefly discuss some of the policy parameters and educational circumstances that prevented significant change in the delivery model of education for
NT Community Education Centres, and to then articulate the main theoretical underpinnings which enabled the implementation of a more inclusive, creative and diverse curriculum. Discussion of the development and embrace of a critical pedagogy which formed the basis for the successful challenge to the strongly accepted belief in the differential provision of curriculum for Indigenous students in remote schools will then be presented with emphasis on the importance of an emergence of a critical consciousness for both teachers and students, which lay at the heart of a more dialogic education process. Finally the changing nature of the school curriculum will be discussed as a means of providing a connection between the theories that guided the transformation and the practices that emerged.

Policy and Educational Initiatives as Impediments to Curriculum Access

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the events that took place at Kalkaringi from late 2001-2005, it is crucial that I briefly describe the educational circumstances that preceded late 2001 both within the school, typical of many others operating at the time, as well as some discussion of the policy parameters that prevented significant change in the delivery model of education for the larger remote schools referred to as Community Education Centres.

In late 2001, the Community Education Centre, the type of school most often found in the larger remote communities of the Northern Territory was not acknowledged as a school with secondary school students, even though many attended. In 1995, this type of school was considered “a recent innovation” (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p.179) designed to “provide a comprehensive range of educational services to
Indigenous students in remote areas” (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p.179). There were eight Community Education Centres in 1989 and by 1994; the number had grown to eighteen. The older students were openly referred to as secondary aged (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p.179) or post primary students. The invention of these labels was already a significant sign of deeply ingrained discrimination under the guise of providing an appropriate education for these students. This distinction positioned these students as not having earned the status of a high school student, and was important in the accepted construction and delivery of low-level, low-outcome, educational programmes for those students, despite its intention to “provide wider access to education...and support tertiary courses in remote communities” (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p.179). This discriminatory approach to the education of Indigenous students in remote schools was legitimised through this process. Consequently, the failure to recognise the 12-18 year old students as high school students relegated them to school pedagogies based on simplified expectations, mismatched beliefs about their abilities and needs, filling students and their families with minimal dreams and opportunities to maximise their potential.

Essentially, these students were treated as primary school students and it was rationalised by the belief that limited and indeed deficit student literacy and numeracy skills were best addressed through the adoption of primary school methodologies. There was minimal if any consideration of students as adolescents and emerging adults. Judgements about their academic abilities defined their treatment at school. This kind of pedagogy was not neutral:

_education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the_
logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaull, 1990, pp.13-14)

Despite perhaps positive intentions, the period prior to 2001 can be best represented as an attempt to quickly assimilate Indigenous children into Western culture through a “banking system” of education in which:

knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing...[This] negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry...The students...never discover that they educate the teacher. (Freire, 1972, pp. 46-47)

Keeping things simple and fun seemed a reasonable response from both government and bureaucracy to the challenge of attracting remote Indigenous students to attend school. However, such a pedagogical approach positioned generations of Indigenous students in these schools as forced participants in a “dual society” (Kozol, 1991, p.4) in which they were members of a group unable to access the “avenues to economic advancement” (Teese and Polesel, 2003, p.12) that were most often associated with educational opportunity and success.

Despite being termed an innovation, from both policy and operational perspectives, Community Education Centres failed to aim for and hence deliver equitable and commensurate education programs with students of the same age in more mainstream circumstances. The publication and distribution of Foundation and General Studies Courses (The Northern Territory Board of Studies, 1995) proved to be a major vehicle by
which established beliefs about deficit capabilities and low expectations for Indigenous students by both government and the education department found form, were supported and maintained.

Although the initiative aimed “to improve access for Aboriginal students to a comprehensive range of educational programs” (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p.1) within the Access and Equity section of the Introduction to the course booklets, there was a judgement that these courses were necessary because “secondary-aged Aboriginal students …do not yet have the levels of English language and literacy and Western numeracy required to access secondary academic programs” (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1995, p.2). In fact, the existence of the 2-year courses implied and accepted the inevitability that many secondary aged Indigenous students would need to complete an extra 2-year program prior to commencing secondary education. This was not the case for non-Indigenous students in more mainstream circumstances, regardless of any assessment of their academic skills.

Although this paper does not attempt to assess the quality of the pre-school and primary educational programs operating at the time, it is reasonable to suggest that students were rarely if ever provided with a primary schooling experience that provided the foundation for successful secondary education. The course documents go on to state that:

*It is recognised that students from a language background other than English may need a longer period to achieve the same linguistic competence as their English-as-a-first-language peers. Foundation Studies and General studies have been written to meet this need and to act as a bridge*
This discriminatory treatment of Indigenous students sentenced the students to spending two more years, at least, in primary oriented classes, and given the size of many of the Community Education Centres and the attendance level within the post primary classes, the students inevitably received a version of these courses as the only available educational program due to classes staffed as primary classes, with one primary-trained teacher assigned to a class.

Considering the consequences of “differential provision”

In late 2001, while visiting Kalkaringi School, I entered a classroom of what I thought were junior secondary students. They were secondary aged students who were divided into separate boys and girls classes. I was visiting the girls’ class. These students were Year 8 or 9 students and should have been aged between 12 and 15. I met a nineteen year old girl who was sitting quietly in her chair carrying out the work that she was supposed to be doing, and I asked her why she was in this class. She answered, “Because it’s the only class we’ve got” (October 4, 2001). I looked more closely at the work that she was undertaking and I noticed that it looked a lot like schoolwork that my own children completed in Grade 4 of primary school. I then glanced at the textbooks that she was using and I noticed that they were designed for post primary Indigenous students. The standard of work within the books and the label on the front cover seemed mismatched. I asked the teacher about the student. “Did she come to school very often?” “Yes, all the time”, answered the teacher. “Why was she doing this work?” I was told that because these children attended a Community Education Centre, they were only allowed access to this level and kind of secondary education. Rosaria, according to the Principal was able to
access only half a day of education each day. These students were therefore denied 20 weeks of a full-time schooling entitlement each year. For Rosaria, this meant that in the past six years of her schooling, even if she attended every day, she would be 120 weeks behind in her schooling compared to a mainstream counterpart. Surely it should not surprise the listener that Indigenous students from remote schools have found it difficult to meet the level of educational outcomes required within the designated *Northern Territory Curriculum Framework* (NTCF) with these kinds of organisational features in place.

In discussing this issue with teachers who had taught students at the school for more than five years, I was told that young adults like Rosaria were faced with only a few options for their future. Firstly, she could remain at her local school and accept the monotonous, primary school treatment that equated English as second language status with intellectual disability, just as Rosaria had done, with little progression in her learning and minimal to non-existent opportunity to develop graduate capabilities.

Students could leave the community and board in an urban high school facility, but many ex-students and their families believed that these places held the same low outcome views about Indigenous intellectual possibility, but with more side interests to maintain a hold on student retention. The consequence of this option was usually homesickness - a very powerful motivator for students to return home. If a student was sent away in Year 6 or Year 7, based on the return rate of boarding students from the Kalkaringi/ Daguragu communities over the past ten years, the chance that they would still be in the boarding school to complete Year 11 and 12 was minimal to impossible. There had been no
community student who had completed their final certificate of education in a boarding school if they had left in their final year of primary schooling. One female student from Daguragu had been at boarding school and spent four years undertaking Year 11, only completing three of the compulsory twenty two units towards her certificate of education during that time. She was seventeen years old when she left for boarding school, and at twenty one still had not completed what other students would have completed in two years in a mainstream high school. This was the same student who completed both Year 11 and Year 12 in two years at Kalkaringi School in the years following her return from boarding school, gaining admission to University based on her academic score.

The final option was to leave school and face a future shaped by those around them – early pregnancy for the girls and illegal activity for the boys often stemming from the boredom of having no specific activities to undertake each day (employment, education or training). This option was perhaps the most damaging. Each of the other two required a level of determination and commitment from both the student and their family. There were numerous young pregnancies at Kalkaringi and Daguragu, and many young men moved through the revolving door within the prison system. It was not uncommon to see young men spending a couple of months in prison on an assault charge, then released back into the same community surrounded by the same problems and the same people only to become involved in further illegal activity, and once again, charged and returned to prison. In 2005, in the middle school classes at Kalkaringi School, of the fifty of so students from years 7-12, nearly every student had a relative or friend in prison for minor offences like failing to pay fines to far more serious crimes like murder. According to
many of the students, particularly the boys, but not exclusively, prison time, or at best, court appearances, had some level of inevitability attached to their future.

Although within the research, there appears to be some debate over whether the lack of employment for Indigenous young people encourages illegal activity leading to arrests and prison time, or time in prison makes it difficult to gain meaningful employment on release, there seems to be a direct connection between “the importance of addressing indigenous education in order to improve employment and therefore arrest rates” (Hunter, 1997, pp.183-184). Hunter’s research concluded that:

*Education is the largest single factor associated with the current poor outcomes for indigenous employment. Indeed, the influence of education dwarfs the influence of most demography, geography and social variables.* (Hunter, 1997, p.189)

Hunter suggested that educational experience and qualifications are often used as a “screening device” (Hunter, 1997, p.189) for the selection process in gaining employment, and for every young Indigenous person who leaves school before their education is completed, or remains at school, as Rosaria did to undertake an education of “busywork” (Folds, 1987, p.49), the greater the inequity in the possibility for successful employment.

The pedagogy of hopelessness was fully operational at Kalkaringi in 2001. On this day, I saw a classroom filled with young adolescents who were not asked to work hard and indeed covered in a whole afternoon what most secondary students would cover in half an hour. The employment of early childhood/ primary methodology in teaching these students formed a major part of the paralysing effect on tapping into their energy,
excitement and commitment towards learning. School for these students was comprised of simple mathematics; simple English, sport and “busywork” (Folds, 1987, p.49) with activities such as “clubs” in which students played with various equipment for an afternoon session. How could the students complain? How could the families protest? The School Council’s perception was that the schooling experience involved the provision of activities rather than an educational process of inquiry and engagement. The structure of the school’s timetable only enhanced their perception, thereby failing to significantly improve attendance. With a couple of excursions throughout a school year, a sports carnival every now and then, and half days of simple learning, the schooling experience for these Indigenous students, like many others in similar types of schools, was defined, maintained and unchallenged by both families and the teachers who found themselves employed within these schools. Even the leaders seemed guided by the objective of making the students happy as a means of addressing the constant challenge of low attendance.

Over the next four years, I spent a great deal of time with Rosaria listening to her, and observing her in group and individual interviews as well in her classes. As part of her Year 12 studies, she co-wrote a play called “The Visions of Our Future”, about the experiences that led her to enrol and participate in the senior secondary programme in 2002 and 2003. According to the play, Rosaria’s dreams had not been about the world outside of Kalkaringi because she didn’t know anything about that world. Her teachers had told her and her classmates, that she wouldn’t be interested; after all, her world, according to those who stood at the front of the classroom, was destined to include a job at the local store…maybe. Or perhaps, she’d get pregnant and look after a few kids living
on welfare. What was Rosaria’s potential? Who cared? Many said that they cared, and many believed that as long as students like Rosaria came to school every day, that some kind of valuable, relevant and future-preparing education would occur, but it had not. Rosaria’s teenage years had nearly run out, and there seemed to be no sign of change. Why was “differential provision” invisible to those who worked with the students?

**Curriculum inequality contributes to perpetuation of pedagogies of hopelessness**

The “*Learning Lessons Review*” provided significant research that reviewed Indigenous education in the Northern Territory in 1999 (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999, p.19) and it suggested that “*high teacher turnover and poor attendance*” remained “*the most significant cause[s] of poor learning.*” While these two factors certainly have a detrimental effect on any child’s capacity to maximise the opportunities that come from their schooling, they did not explain the evolution of school days in remote schools that offered half the learning time to its students, or a curriculum programme that offered a dumbed-down version of two or three of the available seven or eight knowledge areas as outlined and mandated in curriculum frameworks throughout Australia. These organisational constructs were noticeable signs of long term “*differential provision*”. Indigenous students attending schools in remote locations were treated as receivers of selected instruction determined to be appropriate for them. More harmful however, was the legitimisation of “*differential provision*” thereby locking students out of future possibilities that required skills and knowledge in areas such as high levels mathematics and specialist science strands regardless of an assessment of individual student abilities and talents.
Contributing to the pedagogy of hopelessness was the creation and maintenance of the unchallenged assumption that there was one approach to teaching a supposed homogenous group known as Indigenous children which in turn served to make invisible the diversity within the Indigenous children as a race of young people. Moreover, there was an ongoing discontinuity between this pedagogy and the rhetoric of expected outcomes defined by both Territory and Commonwealth governments. If for example, Year 3 and Year 5 Indigenous students were denied access to the pre-requisite mathematical knowledge for the compulsory numeracy basic skills test, then their failure in that test was assured, and if this access was denied over a long period of time, then the failure would be evident as a pattern of outcomes for those students. This is of course what current data from basic skills testing indicate.

Despite improvements in Indigenous education funding, according to Mellor and Corrigan (2004, p.42), there has been minimal if any reduction in the gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the last decade Without monitoring systems noting the exact educational journey undertaken by each student, the quickly changing teaching force within any remote school has been unable to ensure that requisite mathematical skills and knowledge, for example, have been developed in their students rather than repeating material that has already been covered. If how we think about the education of Indigenous students in remote schools remained the same, and the students are thought of as a minority group of homogenous, deficit, post primary or secondary aged children, then expected outcomes as defined in departmental curriculum documents (such as the NTCF) cannot ever be achieved because the students are
prevented from accessing and displaying their capacities and capabilities. They are prevented from uncovering their maximum potential.

With educational funding increasingly tied to numeracy and literacy testing with consistently, disappointing results coming from Indigenous students in remote schools in that testing, it is not surprising that the most popular model of educational delivery in a remote school focuses primarily on simple literacy and numeracy. It becomes very easy and often comforting to simply surrender to the pressures of the dominant paradigm and relentlessly pursue the holy grail of improved literacy and numeracy. If, as the Commonwealth Government suggests, our educational focus should be on the development of literacy and numeracy then the structure of a typical school day in a remote school would not surprise the listener. A day in which one portion is for literacy, one portion for numeracy and one portion for having fun, doing sport or other activity based enterprises might be defined as, not only, as good as it gets, but what the students need. As Harste (1993, p.20) stated,

*Curriculum is a device not only for conveying the past but also a device for shaping consciousness. Curriculum planning is not a neutral activity. The way we conceptualise curriculum and the questions we ask about it will have a critical impact on the kinds of school setting we create. Curriculum planning is a moral activity involving commitments to, beliefs in, people and the role we envision schools playing in a democracy.*

The provision of a system of teaching and learning that failed to encourage curiosity, debate, discussion and diversity of opinion as well as a lack of breadth and balance of
curriculum begins to define pedagogical practices leading towards the destination of hopelessness that has taken hold in remote schools throughout the Northern Territory. Students denied access to and experience in the sciences, many of the humanities, areas of business and law as well as information technology are indeed hobbled at the gate. The resounding voices of those who have supported these decisions often declare cultural inappropriateness in their defence (Meaney, 2002). Kalkaringi School’s response to the question of cultural appropriateness was dealt with as a methodological question rather than an imposition on educational entitlement.

Prior to late 2001, Kalkaringi School, like many other remote schools, went about its business enveloped in this kind of environment of hopelessness:

*Everything is acceptance...People get used to what they have. They figure it’s the way it’s supposed to be and they don’t think it’s going to change...If you don’t know what you’re missing, you’re not going to get angry. How can you desire what you cannot dream of?* (Kozol, 1991, p.228)

The embrace and lack of challenge to this kind of pedagogy of hopelessness locked thousands of Indigenous students and their families into an educational environment that defined simple, basic, friendly and fun as the key elements in remote school education delivery, and as Kozol suggested, if you don’t know any different, then you’re not going to get angry, and demand something else.

The depth of the challenge was increased substantially with a closer investigation of what was happening to the so called post primary students. Through the establishment of a new School Council; the appointment of an Indigenous Community Liaison leader working closely in partnership with the principal, it became apparent, through discussions with
parents and care givers of the children attending Kalkaringi School, that they were
genuinely unaware that their children were denied their full educational entitlement, and
that no Australian child should be denied access or equity to education. They were aware
that children in other more mainstream schools completed a different kind of education,
but they were convinced that the differences in educational delivery defined the status
quo. How would a parent know about all that was possible for their child if their own
experiences reinforced the view that school was a place in which children never moved
past the post primary identity, never completed senior secondary education and never
attended university or had important well-paid jobs? Parents in this community never saw
anyone from their community school become a doctor, lawyer, or engineer and most
people they knew were unemployed, pregnant or in prison and suffering from a variety of
serious illnesses.

THE TRANSFORMATION BEGINS

Creating the cultural interface as a space to explore an expanded curriculum
entitlement

The discussion of discriminatory policies and pedagogies based on beliefs of deficit and
hopelessness that shaped the inevitability of educational failure for Indigenous students
located in remote communities perhaps leaves the listener overwhelmed by such
bleakness. In late 2001, the principal of the school shared that feeling. However, rather
than wait for a government to respond to complex educational problems within the
remote context at a systemic level, it became more productive and potentially
transformative for school and community leaders at Kalkaringi School in 2002 to
consider building new hopeful constructs from the bottom up and from the inside out.
Leaders at the school were committed to enacting an educational “project of possibility” (Simon, 1987, 1992) supported by a “pedagogy of possibility” (Giroux and Simon, 1988; Simon, 1987, 1992) as an alternative believing that “if the world of self and others has been socially constructed, it can likewise be dismantled, undone, and critically remade” (Giroux, 1988, p.xix).

In early 2002, the newly appointed principal asked that families from the communities of Kalkaringi and Daguragu consider the following questions – “What do you want the schooling process to do for your children? What is the purpose of the classroom experience?” In other words, “what kind of young people do you want your children to become when they have completed their high school education?” Rather than the more common question of “what do you want your children to do at school?”, these questions acknowledged the crucial importance of defining the purpose of education as a first step in shaping a model of education that could engage the teachers, students and their families in the kind of change that had the capacity to transform the future for the next generation of Indigenous adults.

Historically the remote school classrooms and the culture of the remote schools had different purposes than that of the more mainstream, non-Indigenous schools. Any classroom can be a place in which voices are silenced or listened to. However, the remote school, with differences in languages, culture, the isolationist nature of school locations and the extra pressures on teachers from living in isolated communities have most often prevented the creation of schools as meeting places in which diversity is not merely appreciated but challenged; described but debated, and has resisted an “against the
“grain” (Simon, 1992) pedagogical approach in which its purpose becomes the construction of new knowledges within what might be termed a new cultural “interface” (Ford, 2005, p.11). As Ford suggests, the remote school can become a site for a “new generation of people working together in partnership in a new era towards a future that is unknown, but one that has improved outcomes for Tyikim [Indigenous] knowledge interests.” The school or “interface domain” is a place in which:

theorising and practising can establish new relationships between cultures (Tyikim and Padakoot) [Indigenous and non-Indigenous], which lead to a new synthesis of ideas beyond the limitations of biculturalism, cross-culturalism, bilingualism, both ways and two-ways schooling, old ideas that have previously occupied and colonised this central space.” (Ford, 2005, p.11)

Established curriculum knowledge organised within codified subjects can form the foundation for establishing new relationships between cultures within the “interface domain” and undergo transformation and transmogrification to enable new knowledges to emerge, which represents the coming together of the hearts and minds of the students and teachers.

*It is by hearing all voices that new conversations about the kind of life we want to live and the kind of people we want to be are begun. Strong democratic communities are created when we know what contributions each voice makes and we collaboratively take new action.* (Harste and Short, 1989)

These concepts initiated recognition of the problematic within the kind of curriculum that was implemented at Kalkaringi School, and the less than transparent way in which curriculum was implemented without the informed involvement of the parent body and without the intent to create a “dialogic education”. As Hooks (2003) said:
In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of – not only within – our own group...We have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with another person, we have the possibility of making a change within ourselves, that we can become deeper. (hooks, 2003, pp.xv-xvi)

How could we expect students to emerge from their schooling with dreams of a better future with the skills and confidence to be able to own their images, articulate them and construct pathways in order to achieve, if their learning environment failed to connect reading words with reading reality, so the two could speak to each other? (Shor and Freire, 1987, p.135) It was clear that innumerable students, like Rosaria, had emerged from the schooling experience only able “to describe things but not to understand them...the more you separate description from understanding, the more you control the consciousness of the students” (Shor and Freire, 1987, p.135).

In late 2002, the Principal continued the ongoing dialogue with the students, their families, and the school and community councils offering the following proposition: What if as parents we learn more about our children as they grow older? What if we learn more about education as our children become more educated? What if we learn more about what we don’t know because of what our children do know? What if we learn more about the world and our place in it because we share our ideas and listen to others’ ideas in a coming together of the minds and hearts? Surely then, we need to recognise parents and families as belonging to a “circle of learners” (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1990, pp.151-152) with school leadership and teachers.
“We make the road by walking”, said Paulo Freire (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1990, p.6). These words, derived from a proverb by Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1982, p.143) inspired the transformative work at Kalkaringi School to proceed by encouraging the people within the school to move past condemnation of the past and instead use it as a focus for reflecting on how things had come to be this way, and what could be done to ensure a better future for its young people? Kalkaringi School relied on a conceptualisation of change that was both multifaceted and complex, drawing on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1990; Freire, 1972; Freire and Dillon, 1985), the Frankfurt School of critical theory with the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm; Henry Giroux’s expanding work on critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1983, 1988) and Roger Simon’s work on schooling as a project of possibility (Simon, 1987, 1992) to provide an optimistic and emerging theoretical framework in addition to a critical language which had the potential to “unravel and comprehend the relationship among schooling, the wider social relations which inform it, and the historically constructed needs and competencies that students bring to school” (Giroux, 1988, p.xi). This was crucial in changing the business of Indigenous education in a remote school because only through such a framework and language was there the opportunity to “to recognise how the dominant school culture is implicated in hegemonic practices that often silence subordinate groups of students as well as deskill and disempower those who teach them” (Giroux, 1988, p.xi).

Kalkaringi community rejected the pedagogy of simplicity and deficit, and challenged the prejudicial and discriminatory policies that were operating, under which its school was governed. The school community decided that the model of education they wanted for
their children would focus on its purpose and achieving a re-defined purpose. At the end of their schooling, the community wanted young people:

who are empowered ... [and] become conscious of their own participation in the creation of knowledge, and of their own critical ability to conceptualise and reconceptualise their experiences of reality. (Meintjes, 1997, p.66)

Kalkaringi school leadership which crucially involved the partnership of both non-Indigenous and Indigenous leaders decided that the first struggle must be for commensurate educational entitlement, and then work through how the knowledge areas should be approached, deconstructed, reshaped and reconstructed. This struggle was the first component of the radical approach that Kalkaringi stakeholders devised. As families learned about what was possible and saw their children’s capabilities, capacities, gifts and talents blossom, their hopes and aspirations for their children also blossomed. It was a major step forward that articulated the purpose of teaching and learning to involve:

educating students to take risks, to struggle with ongoing relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside of their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world which is ‘not yet’ – in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived. (Simon, 1987, p.375)

Second Order Change and the Pursuit of Critical Consciousness Drives Curriculum

The investigation of the treatment of Indigenous students within Kalkaringi School formed the first component of transformation that was talked about in meetings throughout the school. The approach rejected simply “try[ing] to improve the efficiency or effectiveness” (Evans, 1996, p.5) of what was already established and practiced. The
problem with this kind of change is that it simply reorganises what an organisation does, and the fundamental values, beliefs and operating rationale that guide why some thing is done, the nature of what is done and how it is done remain safely untouched, unchallenged, and unchanged. Kalkaringi School leadership team aimed to encourage “people to not just do old things slightly differently but also to change their beliefs and perceptions” (Evans, 1996, p.5). This kind of change, referred to as “second order change” (Evans, 1996, p.5) had the potential to threaten people’s most basic values and beliefs and so it is often accompanied by serious and complicated consequences, but without them, real culture change remains merely rhetoric. This is not to suggest that this kind of change was not worth pursuing, but it did mean that any expectation for significant change in values and beliefs necessitated considerable investment in time, ongoing and genuine critical assessment strategies, and a willingness and commitment by everyone involved to think and act “against the grain” (Simon, 1992) after all, government policy was being challenged. This journey became the business of Kalkaringi School from late 2001-2005.

It was clear to the leadership team and the majority of teachers at Kalkaringi School that transforming student identity was a crucial step in delivering on the families’ purpose of education, and one that would begin the long process of responding to the question of how things had come to be the way they were. A changing student identity was a “second order change” and was the enabling brick on which a critical consciousness could be built and developed, challenging the essentially racist beliefs that had become firmly entrenched in the very fibre of each remote school, particularly in regard to determining
who deserved an entitlement to secondary education and how those students should be treated?

What kinds of images were teachers and leaders guided by in order to construct critical educational models of delivery in a remote school? What if through the schooling process, children could become involved in a process of “self-actualization” (hooks, 1994, p.17) and emerge from their schooling experience as individuals capable and ready for “positively transforming their lives and the world around them” (hooks, 2003, p.xiv) through a model of “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1985)?

An active and critical consciousness enables students to respond actively and with direction towards achieving the kind of real culture change that challenges “the frustrating and debilitating conditions” (Smyth, 1991, p.17) in which they live. This applies to teachers and leaders as well who, as they become “oriented to the development of an enhanced “consciousness” of their own circumstances”, they are able to also to participate actively in reconstructing their work lives (Smyth, 1991, p.17).

To move beyond the personal narrative and to “rub familiar narratives against the grain” was part of a painful process in which:

counterdiscourse must turn reflexive and be employed in efforts to comprehend and critique one’s own embeddedness in histories, memories, and social relations that are the ground for one’s understanding of the social world and one’s actions within it. (Simon, 1992, p.61)

It seemed that it was part of many teachers’ methodologies to attempt to listen to the stories told by students and respond in a way that reinforced its validation – “yes, I know
what you mean” or “yes, you make an interesting point with that comment”. How could teachers encourage the participation and commitment from students through a release of their voice when at the same time they wanted to interrogate what had been said. This kind of response from the teacher often meant that the teacher knew where she/he wanted the lesson to go but the students had not been involved in its beginnings. Students were wondering why they were talking about this? Personal and combined interrogation seemed possible when there was an understanding of:

the questions and issues that have motivated the curriculum
which is giving structure to learning and then consider and
challenge the relation between the details of classroom
practice and the social vision they are intended to support.
(Simon, 1992, p.61)

In the critical consciousness model at Kalkaringi School, literacy and numeracy became tools that students developed, utilised and maximised for the greater purpose of increasingly reading the world not just the words (Freire and Dillon, 1985), and increasingly solving problems rather than merely calculating answers. The tools served the purpose of empowerment for freedom. Clearly skills in reading and writing were crucial enabling tools however they did not provide the basis for a model of education. Kalkaringi School viewed them as tools to be used within a model of education. The concern about a simple skills based model of education was that, as Paulo Freire (1985) would say, students will be able to read the words, yes, but they may not have what they need to understand the impact of those words on themselves and their community. They may have a job, but that does not mean that will be motivated to come every day. The simple skills-based model “continue[d] to sustain and maintain conditions that
effectively thwart[ed] reflective processes” (Smyth, 1991, p.15) thereby failing to develop a critical consciousness within both teachers and their students.

In the model of critical consciousness at Kalkaringi School, everything contained within the schooling experience, both inside and beyond the classroom became a catalyst for the development and mastery of attributes, knowledge, skills, understanding and abilities that enabled students to ask and respond actively to the question: “how have things come to be this way?” and to contemplate, reshape and act upon ways of improving the present. A changed future became a possibility. Of course, the journey towards a critical consciousness requires an all encompassing commitment from students, leaders and teachers as well as the school council and community members who slowly became partners in this journey, and indeed learned to enjoy the discovery and reconstruction of their own histories and the realities in which they were embedded (Smyth, 1991, p.2).

This is not to say that there were not casualties in this process. Second order changes presented an enormous challenge to those who wished to retain the status quo of the past. Once the partnership members “acquire[d] the capacity to understand, to challenge, and ultimately, to transform their own practices” (Smyth, 1991, p.2), then behaviour changed, and that which was impossible once, became not only possible, but importantly shaped a new reality. As partners in a “circle of learners” (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1990, pp.151-152), it was possible to re-construct aspirations, hopes and dreams. Behrendt (2003) suggested that:

\[ \text{The tensions between Indigenous Australians and the dominant culture are wrapped up in identity: how Australians see themselves, how they see others and how} \]
they want society to respect who they are... How societies deal with ‘otherness’ and ‘sameness’ will impact on their ability to allow individuals freedom from oppression and enough scope for the exercise of liberty. (Behrendt, 2003, p.76)

The concept of “otherness” had been used in the past to discriminate against Indigenous students, limiting the educational delivery in Community Education Centres by portraying cultural difference as a justification for reduced Indigenous student learning. A crucial part of the project of possibility was declaring that some things that had previously be defined as needing to be the same as in other students and schools, in fact, needed to be different and some things that were different in other schools, needed to be implemented in the same way at Kalkaringi. The paradox of “sameness” and “otherness” was a constant focus for reflection and debate for leaders, staff and community throughout the four years.

**Critical theory and critical pedagogy advance the transformation of Curriculum**

In my early years of research (1996) in examining secondary education in remote schools, a young teacher asked me if I thought it would be permissible to introduce the topic of China to her class of Indigenous students in Middle Primary. It was like a breath of fresh air to hear a teacher thinking about moving beyond what had always been accepted as the required Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE) curriculum for Indigenous children - teaching them about their own community. “Why wouldn’t our students be interested in China?” was my reply. The teacher pursued her program and it proved to be one of the drawcards for the students’ attendance. The lessons on China raised their curiosity, their willingness to ask questions and seek out more information about a people that they said “all looked the same!” as well as significantly develop their
critical literacy skills to be able to establish links with words and meanings within a more global context. It had encouraged students to reflect on new images and ideas about a much larger world than their own. In essence, the teacher utilised critical theory within her critical pedagogy probably without being aware of it underpinning her beliefs about student learning and curriculum development. The implications of imposing a culture of curriculum exclusion on any group of students or race of people:

represent[s] an attack on the notion of culture as a public sphere where the basic principles and practices of democracy are learned amid struggle, difference and dialogue.... [it] legitimate[s] forms of pedagogy that deny the voices, experiences, and histories through which students give meaning to the world and in doing so often reduce learning to the dynamics of transmission and imposition. (Shor and Freire, 1987, p.135)

In its beginnings, transforming the remote school in Kalkaringi was significantly tied to the fundamental and philosophical principle of critical theory that “men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege” (McLaren, 2003, p.69).

By focusing the critical lens more specifically on education, the work of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux and the application of the concept of “radical pedagogy” (Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983) to the Indigenous context, the transformation plan began to take shape with “macro objectives” (McLaren, 2003, p.71) adopted as essential building blocks that rejected pedagogy as “a discrete set of strategies and skills that are used to teach prescribed subject matter” (Doyle and Singh, 2006, p.51), replacing it with a form of
critical practice in which students “acquire a broad frame of reference or worldview” (McLaren, 2003, p.71), helping them to “acquire a political perspective” (McLaren, 2003, p.71). As Freire said:

*The more people participate in the process of their own education, the more the people participate in the process of defining what kind of production to produce, and for what and why, the more the people participate in the development of their selves.* (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1990, p.145)

The main “macro objective” (McLaren, 2003, p.71) was “to empower students to intervene in their own self-formation and to transform the oppressive features of the wider society that make such an intervention necessary” (Giroux, 1988, p.xi) and crucial for developing and embracing a “pedagogy of possibility” (Simon, 1992). A pedagogy of possibility might be defined as the practice of teaching which “involves learning on the part of those we are teaching, as well as learning, or relearning, on the part of those who teach” (Freire, 1985, p.177). What does a pedagogy of possibility look like and feel like, and how is it systematised within a whole school?

**Exploring and Developing Critical Consciousness within the Cultural Interface of New Curriculum**

Each classroom was conceived of as a beginning within an “empty space” (Brook, 1968, p.110) in which knowledge finds life and form, and explores the possibilities of filling that space with student voice and critical consciousness, making it a useful tool to develop critical voice from both students and teachers. Critical educator, bell hooks used the phrase *coming to voice* to describe the journey that people take to:
become either agents in the process of making history or how they function as subjects under the weight of oppression and exploitation within the various linguistic and institutional boundaries producing dominant and subordinate cultures in any given society. (hooks, 1989, p.12)

This became the intention of every class and every subject. There can be no coming to voice if students are treated as objects or empty receptacles awaiting filling.

*Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless - our beings defined and interpreted by others... Awareness of the need to speak, to give voice to the varied dimensions of our lives, is one way [to begin] the process of education for critical consciousness.* (hooks, 1989, p.12)

The new approach at Kalkaringi combined the voices of many of the critical theorists. Teachers broke with immersion in the habitual, in the everyday (Greene, 1990, p.10). This involved utilising the curriculum approaches from Shapiro which combined “personal narratives with social critique using reflections on ... memories to produce a language of cultural awareness” (Shapiro, 1994, p.66), and the work of Catherine Walsh with Puerto Rican students as they struggled to find their voice and agency (Walsh, 1991). These approaches provided tools to liberate, emancipate and find voice. The intention of the change was to shape an environment in which students could:

*become challengers...take initiatives... begin to create the kinds of spaces where dialogue can take place and freedom can appear. And it is then, and probably only then, that ... [the students] begin thinking about working together to bring into being a better, fairer, more humane state of things.* (Greene, 1986, p.72)
The introduction of key subjects in the senior years programme like Legal Studies, Aboriginal Studies, Studies of Societies, Science and English as Second Language provided opportunities for students to expand their awareness of challenging ideas, concepts and perspectives, as well as opportunities to develop critical skills, abilities and capacities that seemed to have laid dormant for much of their schooling life. Each subject outline provided a basic framework which was explored within the cultural interface domain, and set about challenging the assumptions underlying each framework. Studies of Societies, for example, undertaken in Year 12 or the final year of high school, was considered to be a so-called academic subject or a “hard” option (Teese and Polesel, 2003, p.12), and therefore inappropriate for Indigenous students located in remote schools. This was not a written statement, but a suggestion implied within the many conferences developed to help teachers working in the senior years in remote schools.

Kalkaringi School leadership and teachers viewed such implications as a challenge to curriculum development. If the curriculum offerings devised by the South Australian Senior Secondary Assessment Board, SSABSA (which provided Northern Territory’s schools with its senior years curriculum) were designed to respond to the needs of a wide variety of students from a diversity of circumstances and situations, then such a subject should be tested against its goals. The Studies of Societies Curriculum Framework stated that:

*Through Studies of Societies, students can become more informed about the social, political, economic, and cultural factors that affect different societies. They will gain an understanding of difference, reflected in diverse value and belief systems, lifestyles, and social and political structures. They will develop an understanding of social behaviour and*
processes in contemporary Australia, and an awareness of the interdependence of members of the global community.
(Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 2002, p.1)

What better way to strive for a critical consciousness and a dialogic education than in an interaction with such objectives. Kalkaringi School was the first and only remote school to engage with this subject. Assessment tasks were shaped to meet the objectives as well as tap into ways of learning and teaching that had meaning for the students. Materials developed throughout the year-long subject at Kalkaringi School were assessed and found to be of the highest standard and used by SSABSA as exemplars to encourage other schools and their teachers to undertake this subject. Year 12 students from Kalkaringi School successfully passed Studies of Societies, and expanded their views of the world; their understanding of concepts that had previously remained untouchable and discovered new knowledge that only they could contribute to the “interface domain” in which this knowledge was explored. Similar descriptions of students’ experiences could be offered in regard to each of the subjects aforementioned As Kalkaringi School evolved into a place in which student voice emerged, and freedom to debate, discuss, reshape and restructure knowledge was struggled for, the educational journey assumed a meaning for all of us that had not been either contemplated or experienced before.

A Year 11 Mathematics Unit of work that mainstream students would complete in a semester was thought to be only possible for Indigenous students to complete in a full year prior to 2002. Where was the evidence for such a statement from the distance education service operating in the Northern Territory? There was no evidence apart from
responses that said, “well, that’s the way we’ve always done it. Indigenous students need more time than other students.” According to the requirements for achieving the Northern Territory Certificate of Education (NTCE), 22 units each representing a semester of work or 50 hours of work, needed to be passed successfully. If students were undertaking one-semester courses as a matter of established practice in a full year, the average two years to complete the NTCE would never be achieved, and indeed the timeframe for completion for an Indigenous student might be five or six years. In 2002, Kalkaringi Year 11 students were the first remote Indigenous students to complete the one-semester course successfully in one semester. They were also the first Indigenous students from their home community to complete the requirements of Year 11 in one year like their mainstream counterparts.

Prior to 2002, Science did not feature in the Middle Years curriculum at Kalkaringi School, and this was not an isolated exclusion. The exclusion was justified by declaring that Indigenous students did not need to know or could not relate to the difficult knowledge contained within the Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Geology and Astronomy strands of the Science curriculum. The response from those teaching in the school, from other schools and other leaders was that students from remote schools were not going to be scientists and they already had a more cultural understanding of their own community. Families were not told however that if this exclusion persisted, the chance that there would ever be a doctor, nurse, physiotherapist, or any of the wide range of other medical support personnel emerging from a remote community was nil, because the chance that any student would be able to undertake Science in Years 11 and 12 would also be nil. In 2003, as part of the challenge to existing beliefs based on the delivery of minimal
curriculum delivery, Kalkaringi Year 12 students successfully passed Year 12 *Science* and *Science* formed a non-negotiable part of the curriculum from Pre-school to Year 11, with *Science* Scope and Sequence documentation enabling students to engage in all scientific strands in a challenging, engaging and developmental manner throughout their years of schooling. I had the privilege of viewing a Year 9 *Genetics* class in late 2005, and it was very clear that there were no limits on the learning that was possible within the cultural interface in which teacher and students came together.

**Projects of Possibility within Remote Schools through Curriculum Transformation**

Although Kalkaringi School was the site for the historic achievements between 2002 and 2005, the radical change in thinking about curriculum for Indigenous students; the re-defining of purpose of education; the embrace of critical theory as a means of thinking about the development of the critical consciousness; the coming to voice for both students and teachers within the “interface domain”; and the emergence of new knowledges from such a domain presented some of the significant aspects that defined the “*project of possibility*” within one remote school, and which ultimately sparked action from both the Northern Territory Government as well the NT DEET to reconsider existing policies, and enable, at a controlled pace, the growing capacities of remote schools throughout the Northern territory to “*image that which is not yet*”, and slowly make it happen.

The reinstating of curriculum entitlement across the school including the re-defining and implementation of core curriculum which included *Aboriginal Studies, Legal Studies, Studies of the Environment* and *Science* was the first significant change within the project that debunked views about the need for a “*differential provision*” of curriculum, and
ensured that knowledge areas were available to all students. Methodological questions remained at the heart of pedagogical development within Kalkaringi School, but as long as such an exploration and future discoveries resided within a cultural interface, students emerged just as their families had hoped for – empowered and “conscious of their own participation in the creation of knowledge and of their own critical ability to conceptualise and reconceptualise their experiences of reality.” (Meintjes, 1997, p.66)

In 1998, only 16 Indigenous school leavers from the Northern Territory entered university. None were from remote communities. In 2003, 58 Indigenous students achieved a Northern Territory Certificate of Education (NTCE) including three from Kalkaringi, the first remote school to achieve this. Four other communities (Maningrida, Wadeye, Elcho Island and Yirrkala) were provided with departmental permission and support to commence similar programs to Kalkaringi after 2003, and other communities including Borroloola, Ramingining and Milimgimbi have joined the “project of possibility” since 2005.

REFERENCES


Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia 2002, *Stage 1 and Stage 2 Studies of Societies Curriculum Statements 2007*, Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, Wayville, South Australia.

Shapiro, S. 1994, 'Re-membering the body in critical pedagogy', *Education and Society*, vol. 12, no. 1.


Simon, R. I. 1987, 'Empowerment as a pedagogy of possibility', *Language Arts*, vol. 64, no. 4, April, pp. 370-382.


