

Chapter 7

Analysis of National Test Scores in Very Remote Australian Schools: Understanding the Results through a Different Lens

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ABSTRACT

Based on the current research of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, this chapter presents an analysis of the 2012 Australian National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy data from very remote schools across Australia. The data support perceptions of apparent failure in remote education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The reasons for this failure are often attributed to disadvantage. In this chapter, the author proposes that the perceptions of failure are built on philosophical, sociological, economic, and psychological assumptions that may not be shared by those who are subjected to tests. It is therefore possible to critique remote education, not as a failure, but as a reflection of the values it embodies. That critique allows for different ways of understanding difference framed around the perspectives that come from the context of very remote schools.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘problem’ of remote education is reflected in a discourse of disadvantage, of student failure, of poor outcomes, of poor attendance, low quality teaching and teachers. Blame for the apparent failure often rests with: teachers for their pedagogy and their commitment; communities for their dysfunction; families and their ‘lack’ of

engagement in education; and students themselves, who seem to reject the value of education that is on offer (for example Hughes & Hughes, 2012). Occasionally the system itself comes under fire for its resourcing of schools, for its dogmatic stance on nationalised standards, curriculum and testing regimes. All in all, the picture painted by many commentators (see Guenther, Bat, & Osborne,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7495-0.ch007

2013; Osborne & Guenther, 2013a) is bleak, negative and despairing of the situation.

The solutions to the problem are sometimes described in simple terms as they relate to one or more of the factors above. In the last five years there has been an increased focus on ‘closing the gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes. Numerous initiatives and National Partnership Agreements have been designed to address what are seen to be the key issues: improving teacher quality, improving literacy and numeracy, addressing needs of low socio-economic status schools and their students, and improving infrastructure in schools. The Northern Territory, which has about half of all Australian very remote schools with more than 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, received special attention with a ‘Closing the Gap’ partnership agreement and through the Northern Territory Emergency Response, which has transitioned into ‘Stronger Futures’.

The analysis presented in this chapter shows that, after five years of concerted effort and numerous initiatives, the test results of students in very remote schools are almost unchanged. While this may be of interest, the bigger question is why is this so? Beyond this, it is perhaps more important to understand what can or should be done in response. These issues are of concern to the Remote Education Systems (RES) research project, funded through the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation.

THE REMOTE EDUCATION SYSTEMS PROJECT: BACKGROUND AND METHODS

The Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) supports a number of research projects, most of which are concerned with improving a range of outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities. The RES project

is particularly concerned with uncovering strategies and models that work to improve educational outcomes for students from very remote communities. The project has a duration of five years and is due to complete in mid-2016. Remote and very remote communities are here defined using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Remoteness Structure (ABS, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The initial focus of this chapter is on National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test scores and what they tell us about very remote schools. These tests are at times contentious as shown by a recent Australian Senate Inquiry (Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2014), which suggested that students with disabilities and those from non-English speaking backgrounds were disadvantaged by the tests. The literature examined in this chapter first considers the rationale and purpose of national testing in Australia. It then considers the various responses that have been initiated in recent years to address the disparities in the results of those tests between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australian students. Finally, the literature review moves from the pragmatic response to the philosophical and theoretical foundations of what is recognised in Australia as a ‘good education’.

The Rationale and Purpose of Testing in Australia

National testing across Australia for assessment of literacy and numeracy began in 2008. Prior to this, each jurisdiction in Australia assessed literacy and numeracy independently. The primary purpose of the National Assessment Program (NAP) is described as determining whether or not students are succeeding in terms of a range of prescribed outcomes:

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