

Chapter 5

Country as classroom

Bill Fogarty

I am sure that many of you reading this book will be aware of the appalling state of education in remote Aboriginal communities. Over the past decade stories in the mainstream media about the failure of schools to educate Aboriginal children have become a regular feature of the national news and current affairs cycle. In particular, *The Australian* newspaper has been at the vanguard of the reportage, with journalists like Justine Ferrari and Verity Edwards leading the charge.¹ Such stories are invariably characterised by the latest set of bleak educational outcomes, poor test scores or low school attendance figures. These reports are generally written in a tone that carries a certain ‘moral outrage’. The outrage – often implicit rather than overt – is over the fact that such a dire educational situation can exist for Aboriginal people in a modern, rich, first world democracy like Australia. Indeed, on the face of things our consistent inability to educate such a small minority of the population beggars belief. Ironically though, the latest bout of public policy and media attention has done little to help reverse a status quo that has existed for at least 50 years. In fact, the latest policy responses to this not-so-new ‘crisis’ in Australia’s remote north may be pushing educational approaches in a direction that is doing more harm than good.

In this chapter, I want to dig beneath the statistics and the outrage that dominate discussions about remote Indigenous education to talk about some common sense approaches to learning in the bush that seem to be working. The perspective I am presenting here is informed, in part, by the research I have undertaken in remote parts of the Northern Territory over the last six years. This has been done in collaboration with some of my colleagues at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and while originally focused firmly on education, my research concerns have increasingly come to rest comfortably within the multidisciplinary team of the People on Country project. In part this is because research

¹ See for example V Edwards (2011) Gap in indigenous school attendance widening, not closing, *The Australian*, 14 February; J Ferrari (2008) One in three Indigenous kids fail test, *The Australian*, 23 December.

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