Full Title: Partnership for Improving Outcomes in Indigenous Education: Relationship or Business?

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Partnership for Improving Outcomes in Indigenous Education: Relationship or Business?

Abstract

This paper examines the Australian government’s Indigenous strategy, in particular interrogating the concept of ‘partnership’, and its sub-injunctions of ‘mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual obligation’ between education service providers and remote and very remote Indigenous communities through the lens of three case study examples.

Increasingly, the Australian federal government is focusing attention on the poor literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous children in remote and very remote locations. The three examples examined in this paper occurred between 2002 and 2007 during the development of the government’s neo-liberal policies about partnership accountability between stakeholders. A case study methodological approach was adopted to investigate the central question examined in this paper: ‘What are the strengths and limitations of the Australian government’s new strategy of partnership based on mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual responsibility in the engagement of Indigenous parents and caregivers in becoming accountable for the education of their children’?

The strongest emergent theme to arise from this analysis was that parents and caregivers, and indeed their broader families and communities, had a distinctly different expectation of what partnership, mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual obligation entails to that of non-Indigenous education service providers. The differences identified were essentially concerned with the meaning of ‘mutuality’ within a partnership approach where Indigenous communities are asserting the right to negotiated agreements that are accountable ‘both ways’ and education services providers are more focussed on a ‘one way’ process of making Indigenous people more accountable for the failures in the education of their children. The difference in intention highlights the limitations of a concept such as ‘partnership’ to effectively engage in the breadth and depth of issues raised by Indigenous families while working in an administratively driven, legally-framed, politically-charged business model of partnership.
Introduction

Engaging the local community in the future of Indigenous education is vital if there is to be a significant shift towards equality of educational outcomes. The development of genuine partnership, based on the principles of cross-cultural respect between the school and the Indigenous community, remains the primary platform to productive, stimulating and responsive highly effective schools servicing Indigenous students (MCEETYA 2005).

Central to the Government’s strategy is a new partnership with Indigenous Australians, based on mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual responsibility (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.4).

Here we have an expression ngapartji ngapartji. It means ‘I give to you and you give to me’. Whitefellas say ‘give and take’. To us that means that we give and they take…that’s what we think (Old Man, Pers. Comm. 1990)

This paper examines the Australian government’s Indigenous strategy as quoted above, in particular interrogating the concept of ‘partnership’, and its sub-injunctions of ‘mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual obligation’ between education service providers and remote and very remote Indigenous communities through the lens of three case study examples. The reason this paper focuses on remote and very remote communities is because the examples draw on work undertaken to report back to communities in these locations about the results of a literacy and numeracy program. The available statistics (see Appendix A) tell us that,

While most Indigenous students in metropolitan and regional areas meet the minimum reading standards, the percentage of students achieving at least the minimum standard of literacy and numeracy skills decreases as the level of remoteness increases (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.14).

Further, this FACHSIA report states that

Achievement is lower for Indigenous students across all year levels. Results for Indigenous students in very remote Australia are extremely poor. The majority of Indigenous students in very remote Australia currently do not meet the national minimum standard in reading, writing and numeracy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.15).

Through analysis of the process of reporting back to parents and caregivers the results of academic testing undertaken in a literacy and numeracy program in three remote communities
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involving nearly 200 students from about 70 families, it is possible to examine the dynamics and consequences of the new narrative of ‘partnership’ being employed in distinct ways by non-Indigenous stakeholders to describe the engagement between providers of a literacy and numeracy program, the school and the parents/caregivers in these remote Indigenous communities. The central question examined in this paper is: ‘What are the strengths and limitations of the Australian government’s new strategy of partnership based on mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual responsibility in the engagement of Indigenous parents and caregivers in becoming accountable for the education of their children’?

The Case for Partnering

Increasingly, the Australian federal government is focusing attention on the poor literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous children in remote and very remote locations. Kral (2009, p.35) suggests that, ‘There are many complex and intersecting factors that can be attributed to the lower rates of literacy in remote regions’. She argues that it is important to broaden the scope of the debate about rectifying this obvious failure to address socio-historical and anthropological factors, and presents a compelling case to do so. The focus of this paper will, therefore, test the strength of the idea of ‘partnership’ as a way of improving Indigenous students’ academic outcome in the increasingly politicised process of literacy and numeracy benchmarking.

The context for this work is clearly identified by Langton and Ma Rhea (2009). They surmise that, ‘The problem is to clearly identify what of the myriad factors are causal, which are correlational, and which are irrelevant to successful academic achievement’. Langton and Ma Rhea (2009) go on to argue that,

…‘closing the gap’ is proving elusive with deep professional and ideological disagreements fracturing a coherent response to this problem. Recent national data across a range of education issues (ABS, 2006; 2007; NAPLAN, 2008; MCEETYA, 2004-2007; SCRGRSP, 2006, 2007; TIMMS, 2008;) shows that in some States, indigenous children have, for example, done worse rather than better as a cohort at national benchmark testing over the last three years. There are incremental improvements, for example, in the retention data for indigenous students at Years 11 and 12 but overall, the education system seems unable to significantly accelerate education trends in literacy and numeracy, as the foundations of educational achievement, in a positive direction.

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In the search for reasons that account for some children performing well and some performing badly on the national tests, governments have been persuaded by the argument that there will be no significant improvement in the educational achievements of Indigenous students in these remote communities without the active participation of families, caregivers and communities in the education of their children.

Seddon et al (2004, p.128) suggest that the idea of partnerships in education, while not new, are being reconfigured within the neo-liberal policy framework of education services delivery. They say,

> Education has had a long history of governance based in partnerships. There have been partnerships supporting disadvantaged learners and community development since the 1970s … However, it seems that the ‘new social partnerships’ now emerging are different from those of the past. They often (but not always) build on arrangements or resources derived from earlier phases of public, private, and third sector (i.e., community) partnership activity, but are based in neo-liberal contractualism and often linked to public-private and/or volunteer resourcing arrangements.

In keeping with this development, the narrative of ‘partnership’ is frequently heard within the realm of the provision of education services to Indigenous students and communities, normatively asserted as the new ‘best practice approach’ to improving Indigenous academic achievement by policy makers and Indigenous education leaders alike.

Noel Pearson (1999), for example, has argued that Indigenous parents and communities have a right to take responsibility for their families, a right he subsequently argued had been taken away through ‘the legacy of historical structural causes, of dispossession, trauma, discrimination, and the undermining of indigenous leadership and authority’ (Pearson, 2005, p.7).

The Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership has further developed Pearson’s ideas into an education initiative called the ‘Ready Set Go – School Ready initiative which provides guidelines to parents. The website explains that,

| School Ready | makes sure that parents meet the needs of their child. This might mean that a child is provided with basic needs like food, shelter, clothing and education; and that the child is free from negligent or deliberate harm. |

| School Ready | also relates to required levels of literacy and numeracy skills, and emotional maturity, |
prior to starting school or transitioning from pre to primary school and from primary to secondary school. Being **School Ready** is defined as being ready to learn each school day. This means the student has had breakfast, been provided a lunch solution, has clean, suitable clothing in line with school expectations, has suitable hygiene (e.g. clean, medical conditions treated), has had a good night's sleep and is provided with all necessary equipment for the day’s learning (Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, 2010).


The bureaucratised version of this is the concept in the field of education has seen the evolution of a policy platform where education services providers are expected to enter into partnerships with communities where both parties have mutual responsibilities. The approach to government service delivery to Indigenous people both in the previous Howard government under Vanstone (2004) with her focus on ‘practical reconciliation’ and then Brough (2006) with his emphasis on ‘mutual responsibility’ is again evident in the recent Rudd government’s policy platform *Closing the gap on indigenous disadvantage: the challenge for Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Of relevance to this paper, there has been increasing expectation by schools, and federal and state bureaucracies that it will be possible and/or desirable for parents and caregivers to become ‘partners’ to these agencies in order to provide support for their children in the education endeavour.

In 2003, Figgis and Wildy were commissioned by the MCEETYA Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce and raised specific issues associated with Indigenous parental engagement with test results from schools. They specifically ask how it is possible ‘to add value to numbers’. The context of the case studies involved the author as program evaluator engaging with parents and caregivers to discuss and validate the preliminary findings of the program and to gain their permission for the reporting of data back to the funding agencies involved. The method developed for the process of school-community-data evaluator engagement was in line with the current best practice established by AIATSIS, DEEWR and expanded by DEEWR’s What Works program. The program sought to embed a professional community engagement
model into the delivery of its classroom work. The case study presented in their paper describes
the history of the development of the engagement model with students, schools,
parents/caregivers, the wider community and the major stakeholders providing education
services to this community.

Arguably, the government rhetoric of ‘partnership, mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual
responsibility’ composes a challenging problematic that is the narrative through which
engagement with parents and caregivers of Indigenous students is now conducted. As Rowse
(2002) asserts ‘to apply ‘mutual obligation’ with any degree of sensitivity to, and realism about,
the circumstances of recipients unavoidably raises the issue of the distribution of authority – both
within the state and between the state and its authorised delegates’. While there is evidence that
there were attempts to address this issue through the design of the program discussed in this
paper, the very nature of the government strategy of partnership, mutual respect, mutual resolve,
and mutual responsibility raises the spectre of a new form of coercive administrative
arrangements, couched in relational terms, that defy the logic of the situations to which these
weighty narratives are applied.

Seddon et al (2004, p.139) concluded in their analysis that these new forms of partnership
‘warrant research because they are an instrument and expression of neo-liberal governance and
also a site of practical politics that encompasses both the prosecution of, and resistance to, neo-
liberal political rationality’.

Methodology: perspectives on case study examples and involvement

The three examples examined in this paper occurred between 2002 and 2007 during the
development of the government’s neo-liberal policies about partnership accountability between
stakeholders in a similar context to that discussed by Figgis and Wildy in 2003. A case study
methodological approach was therefore adopted to investigate the central question examined in
this paper: ‘What are the strengths and limitations of the Australian government’s new strategy
of partnership based on mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual responsibility in the
engagement of Indigenous parents and caregivers in becoming accountable for the education of
their children’?"
As Tellis (1997) observes, ‘Case studies are multi-perspectival analyses. This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between them’. Educational and sociological research traditions, both quantitative and qualitative, have employed case studies and a methodological approach and as a research strategy (see, for example, Cohen and Manion, 1994; Gall et al., 1996; Merriam, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; and, Silverman, 2000). Yin (1994, 2009) and Stake (1994) both describe case study methodology in detail.

Equally, work done in the field of Indigenous studies has seen the development of protocols (see for example Ma Rhea and Rigney, 2002; AIATSIS, 2000/2009; NHMRC, 1991/2009) that seek to ensure that work undertaken with Indigenous monies with or for Indigenous people provides clear and transparent outcomes, firstly to those Indigenous people involved, and only then to the wider Indigenous community and other funding agencies.

This paper draws on these bodies of work to develop a descriptive interpretative analysis of three examples that are used to speak to the central question. These studies arise from a series of engagements made by the author and colleagues to report back on program evaluation findings to Indigenous parents and caregivers. In each case, there was a verbal commitment made to Indigenous community representatives that results of various programs would be reported back to communities. The data evaluation teams in each case involved the author and it is through this involvement in the reporting back about program results that the secondary data for this paper is drawn. Community A is a very remote community in Western Australia. Community B is a central desert community in the Northern Territory and Community C is a very remote community in Queensland. The author is an academic with a background in sociology and education. In each example, the evaluation team travelled to the community and met with Indigenous community representatives, school principals and staff, parents and caregivers to report on evaluation findings of various literacy and numeracy programs that had been conducted over a five year period. The evaluators had travelled to these communities numerous times to meet with stakeholders and update them with formative findings, and also to make plans for the next part of the work. The following outlines the processes undertaken:

1. Seek permission to be in the community

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2. Write letters and send faxes and emails to arrange meetings with people
3. Send an announcement to the local radio station
4. Arrange and conduct informal meetings
5. Arrange and conduct personal briefing/s with stakeholders on request
6. Be involved in public meetings and other such presentations as requested

The final meetings were held as family briefings after the summative findings had been collated and analysed. Parents and caregivers were mostly eager to hear how their children had done. In parallel with these activities, there had been increasing focus in Indigenous education on literacy and numeracy testing in the media and many community members also wanted to talk about these tests with the evaluators.

The author has had varied associations with Indigenous families in the three case study sites and has previously argued for the need for improved cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in education. During the period of this work, she found herself in the curious position of experiencing the institutionalisation of concepts that she had been involved in making argument for. Her ‘on the ground’ experiences challenged her prior assumption that governments and schools would improve their attitude to Indigenous people in the communities they served if they took a more inclusive and collaborative approach, understood as a partnership-style approach (see for example, Langton and Ma Rhea, 2009; Ma Rhea 2002; 2004; 2009; Ma Rhea and Rigney, 2002). As this study discusses further below, her naive, celebratory ‘partnering’ intentions did not translate well in practice and these experiences raised many questions about how ‘partnership’, like any other strategy, is vulnerable to the range of human interpretations. As Robert Burns (1785) so famously wrote ‘The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley.’

1. Methods of data collection and analysis

A case study approach was implemented, as discussed above and techniques of grounded theory building were employed to collect and analyse the data. Fieldnotes from travels undertaken to the three sites were kept. Government documents were gathered. Both face to face and telephone conversations were conducted between Indigenous parents and caregivers and the author to
clarify observations and to explore ideas about partnership, mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual responsibility. The conversations never went in a straight line as the detailed discussions below will demonstrate. The agreements to participate in the program made between the parties were always conditional on the full and informed participation of all. If Indigenous people did not want to be involved they did not show up for the meetings. Their interest and willingness to ask and answer questions demonstrated their agreement to be involved and despite many requests to do so, no written paperwork was ever completed.

The analysis was done using three types of coding procedures, open, axial and selective coding drawn from Strauss and Corbin (1990) in conjunction with a technique of matrix design developed from Miles and Huberman (1994). The discussions and field notes were printed out. Each one had from the outset been assigned a number to preserve confidentiality. This number is the only identifying mark on notes and .wav files. There is one main list that links the numbers to the families and this is kept separately from the data.

The analysis process began by the open coding by numbering each paragraph of each interview. After each paragraph was numbered, the process of labelling the phenomena began. The first few fieldnotes were the richest because of the detail. Sometimes something arose from only one word; at other times it was a sentence or a whole paragraph. A list of the phenomena was made for each fieldnote or discussion. The location reference for each example of each phenomenon was recorded alongside that phenomenon. Once the phenomena had been labelled it was possible to count how many times a phenomenon had been spoken about. This gave the first glimpses of the provisional emergent theme present in the findings.

After grouping similar phenomena into conceptual themes, each data was reviewed again and a dimension was recorded for each one according to what the note said. The two processes of labelling the phenomena and grouping the phenomena into conceptual themes, each with their dimensional range, provided a very rich examination of each data, preserving the texture in the dimensionality of the concepts.

The second procedure, axial coding, is not separate from the first and it was easier to move between one and the other. In this process, the data were analysed using a paradigmatic causal sequencing model in order to examine the openly coded texts. In this process, cause and effect
type relationships were examined and this coding technique was used to investigate, and sometimes disrupt, the provisional conceptual themes suggested in the open coding.

At this stage of the data analysis, drawn from discussions with parents and caregivers and also government documents enabled a sensitivity to the conceptual theme to develop. This was particularly so when phenomena were looked at in terms of the causal influences of colonial Australian history, economics and politics.

A Note on Research in Polyvocal Spaces

What someone has said in discussion or phone call is generally treated by researchers as something which can be fixed in some way for the purpose of analysis. This approach is particularly problematic when research is done across linguistic cultures because there is no way to do justice to the words of another unless the context of their speech is respected and understood. Vološinov (1973) discusses convincingly the errors of both abstract objectivism and individualistic subjectivism in the field of linguistic study of language and argues, in accordance with the approach of grounded theory building, that ‘the utterance is a social phenomenon’ (1973, p.82). He says, ‘Contexts do not stand side by side in a row, as if unaware of one another, but are in a state of constant tension, or incessant interaction and conflict’ (1973, p.80).

In this analysis, fieldnotes and discussions were transcribed into text. Data cannot simply be regarded as text without texture. Hongladarom (1993, p.53) describes the relationship of text to texture in this way:

I have used the word ‘texture’ to contrast with ‘text’. ‘Texture’ refers to contextual meanings which include voices embedded in texts. A text without texture is monologic. The relationship between text and texture is crucial for our understanding of the usages of words...

In acknowledging the important contribution made by her in the formulation of the way that the data was collected, examined, analysed and understood, many hours were spent between the author and Hongladarom discussing the problem of doing research across culture. She says (Hongladarom, 1993, p.53):

This as I see it is a crucial problem of methodology that faces us when we try to elicit data from native informants and analyse them for the purposes of our studies. Often we overlook the fact that linguistic data are involved with
intentions and our informants are social agents, not mere data-producing objects. It is legitimate that we want to focus on hard data and analyse them as if they were a text. But in creating text, we leave out the texture, which is an integral part of it. It is this texture that gives us a clue about what sort of interests native speakers have in working with us, and allow their voices to blend, interact, or argue with our researcher’s voice. The text helps us to grasp the referential meaning of the utterance; its texture enables us to see human conflict that shapes discourse.

Vološinov (1973, p. 105) makes the point that,

The separation of a word meaning from evaluation inevitably deprives meaning of its place in the living social process (where meaning is always permeated with value judgment), to its being ontologized and transformed into ideal Being divorced from historical process of Becoming.

In discussions about words and phrases such as ‘partnership’, ‘mutual respect’, ‘mutual resolve’, and ‘mutual responsibility’, attempt was made to overcome this problem by asking discussants to clarify their understanding of these phrases at the time it was discussed. Sometimes this continued to be a problem because either there was no Aboriginal or English language equivalent or the discussant did not know the word or phrase that adequately described the point. In these cases, the discussant was asked to describe the idea as much as possible in whatever language made best sense of their idea. This sometimes meant working across standard Australian English, Aboriginal English, Wik, Gija, Jaru, Luritja, Pitjantjatjara and Kimberley Kriol to get a better idea of what these words and phrases meant. These conversations ranged through other meetings for days as the ideas and shared understandings of meaning emerged. While not perfect, this default to an agreed public meaning meant that it was possible to communicate across linguistic differences with some approximate understanding.

2. Building Theory from Textured Text

In the final part of the analysis the building of grounded theory was begun. In investigating the strengths and limitations of the Australian government’s new strategy of partnership based on mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual responsibility in the engagement of Indigenous parents and caregivers in becoming accountable for the education of their children, there were a variety of opinions, practices and policies being used and taking shape. Before presenting an analysis of the findings, this next section will describe the context and discussions involved in
three case study examples that will assist in giving meaning to the examination of the concept of partnering undertaken in this paper.

The Case Study Examples

In each case, the examples given arise from the last phase of the program when data evaluation teams met with local Indigenous parents and caregivers about the academic test results achieved by their children in the program. The program itself had been explicitly developed using a partnership approach following AIATSIS and NHMRC protocols, ensuring permission from local Traditional Owners and the local Indigenous representative bodies for the program to be conducted on their country, having local representation in the program advisory group, establishing a twice yearly visiting schedule for the program leadership to visit the community and update the key stakeholders about the progress of the program, and an explicit commitment not just to report back to the school and other funding bodies but also to be accountable for the program outcomes to the local Indigenous community.

In each example, the evaluation team arranged to spend a week in the community and employed a local Indigenous staff member of the school to act as the liaison person with the family to arrange and facilitate consultations. The consultations occurred according to the convenience of the families involved. Sometimes there were extended family members present and at other times, individual parents made time to discuss their children’s results in a more private location. Often the children were present and active participants in the discussions. In each case, after a few days, the evaluation team were invited to address the community council or education group, to participate in the local radio program and to attend large community meetings.

Example A: Academic Disparities and the Politics of Health

Example A is a remote community in Western Australia. There were close to 90 students involved in a school-based literacy and numeracy program being reported back to the community. During the program, parental permission had been sought to access individual student WALNA results. Nearly half gave this permission and the other half did not. The results for 15 students involved in Literacy and 8 students involved in Numeracy were able to be compared with WALNA test results (overall total of 17 students – some were involved in both
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literacy and numeracy work). It emerged in the program evaluation stage that a significant number of the students who were involved in the program did not have WALNA data even when the evaluators had permission to access it.

The most significant aspect of this example was that most parents and caregivers had not had opportunity to discuss their children’s academic results. Most did not know that their children had failed to sit the WALNA tests (sometimes over many years) and many did not ever go to the school any more to speak to teachers about their children’s progress. Stories were told of earlier times when teachers would visit families at home and talk to them about things at the school. For reasons unknown to the parents but subsequently clarified by the evaluators, the teachers union strongly discouraged teachers from going to the homes of the families because of occupational health and safety concerns. Policies had been changed and the expectation was now that parents came to the school for parent-teacher meetings as arranged by the school.

Many hours were spent discussing how to interpret the test results and about the disparity between the encouraging noises being made by school teachers about their children and the reality of their poor test results. One mother was very angry because she had been to the school and had been told her child was doing very well. On that basis, she had tried to secure a place for her child at an independent school in Perth. She had been told in Perth that her 15 year old child had a reading age of 7 years old and was even further behind in maths and would not be able to cope in the more advanced environment. This story, variations of which are heard frequently in remote Indigenous communities, highlights the disparity in the quality of education service provision between metropolitan and rural Australia.

In parallel with these discussions, various community members began to make the data evaluation team aware of the terrible impact that Acute Rheumatic Fever (ARF) and Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) was having on the children and how this, rather than getting their children to school, was the biggest concern. The first reaction of the team was puzzlement quickly followed by expressions of ignorance and then eventually frustrated impotence in the face of the magnitude of the problem. Searching the internet they found that:

RHD remains a significant cause of cardiac disability and death among Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with incidence rates among the
highest in the world. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are up to eight times more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be hospitalised for ARF and RHD and are nearly 20 times more likely to die from these conditions (Heart Foundation, 2008).

And:

In Aboriginal people in rural northern Australia the incidence of acute rheumatic fever is higher than that reported anywhere in the world, and the prevalence of rheumatic heart disease is among the highest in the world. While continuing attention must be paid to alleviating the causes of these diseases of poverty, immediate action is needed to improve diagnosis of acute rheumatic fever, adherence to secondary benzathine penicillin prophylaxis regimens, and follow-up of rheumatic heart disease cases (MJA, 1996, p.146).

Parents told of the problems they were having in ensuring that their children took the proper medicines even though there had been a community health campaign explicitly telling them how important the second treatment was in improving the chances of full recovery. As the evaluation team discovered:

The effectiveness of secondary prophylaxis is impaired by factors that contribute to poor adherence to antibiotic regimens and increased incidence rates of ARF. These factors relate to overcrowded housing, poor access to health services, limited educational opportunities and poor environmental conditions. Communities with the highest rates of ARF and RHD are often the least equipped to deal with the problem (Heart Foundation, 2006).

Consensus among the medical profession argues that prevention of ARF/RHD requires broad-scale political commitment to addressing the social, economic and environmental inequities experienced by Aboriginal Australians (MacGuire and Nelson, 2005, p.506).

The key feature of this example was that parents and caregivers felt that they were being held responsible for their children’s school failures, were expected to do more, but lacked both the skills and the resources to do so. Further, there was strong sentiment expressed that outsiders were not interested in helping the community with RHD but were punishing people for not sending their children to school by restricting parental welfare payments and denying children access to the local amenities. As one grandmother asked: ‘Why should we be punished when it is our children who are dying?’

**Example B: Academic Failure and the Politics of Transportation**
Example B is a remote school community in Northern Territory with a 200 kilometre radius catchment area for its students, drawn from 4 Aboriginal language regions. There were close to 50 students involved in the literacy and numeracy program in this example. Like the previous example, parental permission had been sought to access individual student MAP (NT) test results. Ten families gave this permission and the others did not. The results for 10 students involved in Literacy and 7 students involved in Numeracy were able to be compared with MAP test results (overall total of 10 students – some were involved in both literacy and numeracy work). Similar to the example above, a significant number of the students who were involved in the program did not have MAP data or if they did, the parents had not given permission to access it.

The most significant aspect of this example was that most parents and caregivers knew nothing about what their children did at the school. Most did not know about MAP testing and, as with the above example, did not ever go to the school to speak to teachers about their children’s progress. Many people expressed the opinion that it was the responsibility of the government not them to educate their children. One grandmother said: ‘I went to school every day and learnt everything when it was a mission. Why can’t my grandchildren learn English now with the government teaching them?’ Another said that she knew her children enjoyed the (local) language classes because they could understand what was being taught and they were taught by a family member but she noticed that her children and grandchildren were ‘no good at English – they never talk that except at school anymore. We don’t let them mix the language at home – it makes them confused’.

Like the above example, the parents who were most interested in the results were those who were hoping to secure their children a place in an independent school in either Adelaide (because of historical ties to the Lutheran Church) or Melbourne. They described how their children had taken many tests and every time they were told they were not good enough. One professional parental couple, whose children’s results were by far the best at this school, expressed their frustration saying, ‘We send our kids to school every day but they are learning nothing. We want them to go away but it is too late. They are too far behind to catch up. We do our best but we need more help’.
The singular issue of concern raised by parents and other community members during these discussions was the issue of transportation. The charter of the community school is to serve the more remote communities in its catchment area. It has reasonable financial support from the federal government and various church and other philanthropic organisations. Because of its student demographic, it does daily bus runs covering hundreds of kilometres to pick children up from remote communities, bring them to school, and take them home at night. It has been able to attract philanthropic support for the purchase of buses but not for their ongoing operation.

Over the last 30 years, children and other community members have been able to come and go from the communities using this as their transport into town and to school. The children have travelled with their family members, speaking their mother tongue, to a school that has been able to provide meals and clean clothes, helping these remote community children make the transition to come into mainstream English language schooling. Favoured by the Commonwealth for its commitment to these remote communities, reportedly the same is not the case with the Northern Territory government. People told of the political football being played between the federal and territory governments about who pays the bill for the fuel costs and the vehicle maintenance.

Families have been told they must get their children to the main tarmac road (a journey of many kilometres for most) and take the government school bus and that they must do the same in reverse each day. Further, no community members would be allowed to use the government school buses. Given the abject poverty of most of these remote communities, coupled with the scarcity of functioning vehicles, it would be an extraordinary child that would walk 10-20 kilometres every day to get on a bus of strangers, to travel an hour each way, even if they liked going to school. Add to that the extremes of temperature in this desert community, and the injunction of the recent intervention that all children should be at school, the new policy looks laughable. Surely, a rational person would reason, those responsible government agencies would ensure that their policy regimes were seamless and worked to support Indigenous children getting to school rather than severely hampering their best efforts to do so?

The key feature of this example was that parents and caregivers felt that they were being used as pawns in games being played politically by different government departments. This community continues to maintain its strong links to various church communities and speaks warmly of their
commitment to the education of the children. Every parent and grandparent reported that they have better English language skills than their children and grandchildren because of the commitment of the missionaries. They asked us many times why the kids are not learning at school anymore.

**Example C: Academic Failure and the Politics of Housing**

Example C is a remote community in Queensland where the community is cut off from the rest of Australia for a number of months each year during the rainy season. There were close to 80 students involved in the literacy and numeracy program in this example. Like the previous example, parental permission had been sought to access individual student Bandscale (QLD) test results. No families gave permission for individual test results to be accessed by the data evaluators but teachers at the school suggested that many students did not have comparable data available anyway. Despite the absence of comparable data, the community council invited the evaluators into the community to hold meetings with parents of children involved in the literacy and numeracy programs and to hold a community meeting to discuss the findings.

The most significant aspect of this example was that most parents and caregivers knew a lot about what their children did at the school. There is a palpable anger expressed by members of the Indigenous community who believe they should control their school as they had done in the past. Many people expressed the opinion that the government had broken its promise to the community that things would be better for people once the missionaries left. Like the above comment in Example B, many parents and grandparents were culturally strong in their mother tongue and literate and numerate in English. There was no conversation where the topic of why schools are failing to educate the children did not arise.

Like the above examples, the parents who were most interested in how their children were doing academically were those who were hoping to secure their children a place in an independent school in Brisbane or a large regional centre such as Charters Towers. There is a strong movement in this community to send children away to be educated and at the time of writing about one quarter of the student aged population are doing so. Absenteeism is high in the local school and parents described their frustration with seeing their children playing sport and doing
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painting and singing for many hours a week. Many commented that if the children were not learning to read, write and do mathematics then why bother to send them to school at all? One young mother said: ‘I am the best person to raise my kids. I can teach them language and make sure they are safe. The school is wasting my child’s time and she is learning nothing. I get really wild about it and wish there was something I could do to make those lazy teachers teach her’.

Another young mum has already sent her 6 year old daughter to family down south. She said: ‘I got sent away by my grandmother and I came back. You need to be strong to protect your culture and going to school here makes you weak’.

As with the other examples above, there was a pressing issue that was central to many discussions about school failure, the issue of housing. The community has a severe lack of housing and there are large numbers of adults and children living together in extremely cramped conditions. Over the last 16 years, hundreds of state and federal government representatives have travelled to this remote location to discuss the housing shortage. As the stories are told, at first community members were very enthusiastic and came to many meetings to discuss ways to solve the housing shortage. Everyone recognised that overcrowding was causing myriad problems not least of which was that children were not getting enough sleep, were exposed to adult behaviours that harmed them, and were not able to come to school ready to learn.

Various bureaucrats came and went, made promises of 7 houses or 16 houses that would be in the next year’s budget. People in this community became cynical about the promises, eventually stopped coming to meetings, and became really angry when they were then told that because they were failing to come to the table to work together with the government to find mutual solutions that there would be no more new houses.

The key feature of this example was that community members refuse now to be involved in anything where they do not have a direct interest and control. This decision had impact on the literacy and numeracy program because there is so little confidence in anything done at the school that the expectations about a small school based program were very low. Parents and caregivers spoke mostly about the housing problem and their demands to the education department to give them back control of their school. A number suggested that the program would be better to run through the local Indigenous controlled council, or even through the local...
church, rather than the school.

Summary of Findings: Partnering as Relationship or for Business?

The strongest emergent theme to arise from this analysis was that parents and caregivers, and indeed their broader families and communities, had a distinctly different expectation of what partnership, mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual obligation entails to that of non-Indigenous education service providers. The differences identified were essentially concerned with the meaning of ‘mutuality’ within a partnership approach where Indigenous communities are asserting the right to negotiated agreements that are accountable ‘both ways’ and education services providers are more focussed on a ‘one way’ process of making Indigenous people more accountable for the failures in the education of their children. The difference in intention highlights the limitations of a concept such as ‘partnership’ to effectively engage in the breadth and depth of issues raised by Indigenous families while working in an administratively driven, legally-framed, politically-charged business model of partnership.

In examining the concept of ‘partnership’, it becomes apparent that Indigenous people are waiting for non-Indigenous people to engage in partnerships that are interactive, mutually relational, that allow for trust to be built and established between the parties. Seeing the same person more than once is important and there is an expectation of negotiating an agreement that is acceptable to all parties. Nodding does not mean agreement and verbal agreements, when they are made, are considered binding.

Discussions about the education of Indigenous children are at the heart of Indigenous family concerns but so are issues of health, housing and poverty. Sometimes referred to as a revolving door, Indigenous people say that nothing will improve until the issues of health, housing and education are dealt with together. They experience the ebb and flow of political will to fix the big problems and many families said they feel that they are pawns in interagency squabbles. As one old man asked at a community meeting: ‘So where are our houses? They all get paid whether we get the houses or not. They should work on commission and only get paid if they deliver what they promise to us [Laughter and cheers]’. Of particular issue for this discussion, families do not yet have the trust in the education system to engage with the new NAPLAN testing. Neither do
many living in remote communities have the skills to more actively engage in supporting the academic development of their children.

On the other hand, non-Indigenous education services providers are waiting for Indigenous people to engage in partnerships that are business-like and accountable. Predominantly transactive, there is no expectation of relationship because bureaucrats and school staff change often. There is little sense of negotiating agreements because the agents of the government are doing a job to provide a service and do not have the authority to negotiate. The parameters of the interaction are couched in legal terminology and are paper-based. Agreements are contingent on budgets and politics and there is frustration that meetings in communities often get hijacked by other agendas outside the task at hand. Clear examples of this were described above, where the presenting issue was about rheumatic fever, problems with getting funding for diesel and school bus maintenance, and a crisis in housing. More often than not, bureaucrats do not become involved in issues outside their remit, a distinct failure in mutual respect and reciprocity from an Indigenous point of view, where no minister, principal, or bureaucrat is prepared to take responsibility for failed programs and failed promises.

In contrast, older people speak fondly of the missionary days hard as they were for Indigenous people. In important ways, missionaries provided the standard by which all government failure is now measured. The missionary approach was said to have been interactive, mutually relational, allowing for trust to be built and established between the parties over long periods of time. In all the communities in this study, there continues to be active church involvement and support particularly for things that Indigenous people value but that are not supported such as language preservation. These long term friendships provide an alternative to the current narrative of ‘partnership’ that appears to be a one way street.

**Theorising Partnerships for Education as an Exchange Behaviour**

Interestingly, I found in the analysis of the examples that parents and caregivers had developed different exchange expectations from education services providers that derived from what I called different ‘operating logics of exchange,’ across two very different understandings about what ‘partnership’ might mean. Over time a pattern emerged of a continuum of attitudes towards
partnership, the justifications for the transactions, and the expectations of asymmetry, reciprocity and mutual benefit that have become contested within such a complicated engagement as education of Indigenous children.

Attitudes, though, were not fixed in either camp and there was evidence of conflict at many points because of the complexity of expectations placed on the policy of ‘partnership’. These complexities and conflicts exist as much today as fifty years ago but the operating logic has changed significantly.

The different points of this complexity slowly emerge as an analysis of motivation. I identified this motivation as an attempt by each party in the partnership to maximise the value of the exchange primarily for each one’s own benefit. I was able to chart the movement between two operating logics because I talked to people who had participated in missionary education and government education. The passage of time has been a significant determinant contributing to the constantly emerging and shifting interrelationship of Indigenous people with mainstream education. The partnership rules have shifted and earlier stated intentions, as we shall see, are ceasing to operate now even though there are still people exchanging under the old rules.

I have identified two operating logics of exchange embedded in the idea of partnering for education in Indigenous communities: the logic of relational exchange and the logic of market exchange. Central also to this analysis is Riches’(1981, p.214) contention that, ‘the notion of the obligation to give…is an entailment of the multiplex predicament’ which he develops from Gluckman’s (1955) idea of multiplexity. Gluckman posited this term as a way of describing the complex and multiple interactions of humans in their various transactions.

Riches (1981, p.215) defines the ‘multiplex predicament’ as an outcome of ‘people’s evaluation of the circumstances of a single transaction in the context of multiplicity’. Simply put, I understand this to mean that where the account is not balanced there is a multiplex predicament because no-one will sustain constant losses without some sort of balancing action. Riches argues that often this imbalance of account is misrepresented as a gift thus facilitating a slide of understanding that causes ideas of reciprocity over time to come into the equation. This is a useful way to approach the idea of the Australian government having ‘given’ Indigenous people access to schooling over the last 50 years, one that will be discussed in the next section.
Indigenous informants implied that asymmetrical provision of education does not require reciprocity. What was made very clear was that there was a rejection of the new government policy direction; the obligations and entitlements of earlier education under the missionaries was now being redefined in the operating logic of the neo-liberal market. A repeated theme of the data analysis was that each participant in exchanges sought to maximise the value of the exchange for their own benefit. This insight gives some explanation of why so many different expectations are placed on the idea of partnership for improving education outcomes in Indigenous communities.

More general characteristics governing the discussions were related to the rules of engagement that have derived from Indigenous people’s experiences of education by missionaries rather than from the market-driven provision of education by the state. I am using the term ‘relational exchange’ to describe education provision that is governed by local knowledge of morals, ethics, opinions and values of the culture. For example, a school that closed so that children could attend a funeral would be making decisions in a relational context. I am using the term ‘market exchange’ to describe what is often called the neo-liberal provision of education services because such economic behaviour is, in a perfect market, only regulated by the exchange itself. Using the above example, a school would continue to operate as normal despite the needs or concerns of the local ‘consumers’.

The Indigenous experience of education in the past was most clearly located in the relational realm. To paraphrase Mauss’ words (1969, p. 55), there was an educational theology operating, although not the Hindu one to which he was referring. The educational theology in remote Indigenous Australia was missionary and a number of Indigenous people in this small study asserted that they achieved educational success without sacrificing their cultural rights. There is evidence that missionaries had expectations that imposed duties and obligations on Aboriginal people, in particular converting to Christianity. In this aspect, there was some disagreement about this sense of obligation because many Indigenous people in remote communities assert that they were expected to learn the white man’s ways but allowed to keep their own as well. Some of the disparity in opinion about it must be attributed to different regimes that arose from missionary activity, but changed circumstances also have contributed to misunderstandings and
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divergent expectations as missionary activity gave way to government control.

With respect to mutuality, Lebra (1969) posits that asymmetry and reciprocity are opposites that generate and constrain one another and gives the example of the asymmetric principle that is an articulated moral doctrine in Japan, called On. Given that Indigenous people and the Australian government are involved in structurally determined, clearly unequal relations to one another, then according to Lebra’s theory there can be no expectation of giving back something of equal value. It is the responsibility of the powerful one to give, and of the poorer one to also give. For example, one gives material goods, the other gives tacit agreement to autonomy rather than sovereignty. Both are giving what they can and neither action is described by the symmetrical exchange-value dichotomy. Such an understanding of asymmetry reflects a consciousness that exists in remote Aboriginal Australia.

Reciprocity, on the other hand, is understood in the realm of symmetry, where things of recognised equal value are exchanged. If, as is proposed, Indigenous families are not in an equal relationship with the Australian government, then the partnership logic governed by their relational exchange cannot ever be symmetrical, much as the new business-driven market exchange view of partnership is asserted as symmetrical. From this analysis, it became apparent that there has been a transition from interactional exchange between education service providers in the past (missionaries) to transactional exchange with education services providers in the present (mainstream government schools) without a recognition that the idea of partnership is still being contested on a daily basis. Bain and Sayers (1990, p. 11) say that:

…interaction can rightly be referred to as a first order abstraction since it depends on specific relationships, but transaction is a second degree abstraction because it depends on the notion of a relationship as such and it can be negotiated, made or terminated, with anyone.

The former involves developing relationships across the cultural differences between individuals. The latter, the business transaction, does not attempt any cross-cultural negotiating, and does not rely on the same people being involved in all parts of the transaction. Gone are the relational behaviours, and instead the space is opened up for impersonal, transactive behaviours. An asymmetrically obligated, relational partner becomes a symmetrically aligned, business partner.

While the Australia government continues to provide education services to remote Indigenous
communities, many Australian educators and policy-makers have questioned whether these
schools are economically viable or indeed are able to provide education of a sufficient standard
to meet minimum literacy and numeracy benchmarks. This is the extreme end of the business
partnership where the partnership is declared bankrupt and the company dissolved.

Conclusion

In theory, the solution to the multiplex predicament of partnership is to do away as much as
possible with all the situations whereby one could be structurally obliged to exchange something
at a loss. This is having serious repercussions in the crude economic challenge to civic society.
In its most orthodox form, anything that interrupts the perfect market, be it cultural, religious,
political, or any other factor, must be weakened so that transactive behaviour happens according
to market principles. The operating logic is arbitrated by an overarching legal field where there
is an expected symmetry of production and consumption.

The market economy, and its business partner approach to the education of Indigenous students,
is attractive because it is simple and it is clearly defined. The crisis facing the Australian
government is that Indigenous young people are not being well-educated in remote communities
and the logic of the business partnership arrangement between government and Indigenous
parents is weak. Indigenous parents and caregivers are rejecting the pressure for symmetrical
exchange and mutual obligation and instead asserting relational exchange that is based on
asymmetrical negotiated agreements that address the big problems in communities. The
government wants these new partnerships to work. The commitment is there:

The commitments made to date by all governments are a first step towards a new
partnership between the Commonwealth, the states and territories, and Indigenous
Australians, in meeting the Closing the Gap targets. Governments must continue
to work together to sustain this partnership and achieve real results measured
against the targets (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.23).

The challenge for the government is to admit the asymmetrical nature of the exchange and find a
way to reach achievable negotiated agreements with these remote Indigenous communities, to
solve the housing crisis, to eradicate rheumatic fever, to get transportation issues solved quickly,
and to get education working for Indigenous children in proper partnership with Indigenous
parents who will play their part if, and when, the partnership aspirations of the government reach
the same high level of expectation in the relationship approach as they do in the business approach.
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Appendix A: Literacy and Numeracy Data

Percentage of students at or above the national minimum standard, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Indigenous %</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous %</th>
<th>Gap in percentage points</th>
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Source: 2008 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy, MCEETYA 2008

Percentage of Indigenous students at or above the national minimum standard by remoteness, 2008

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Source: 2008 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy, MCEETYA 2008