

Going With the Flow: Power and Relationships in Action and Research

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I. INTRODUCTION

Power is often envisaged as a disease infesting all social discourses, leading to disempowering processes that result in the subjugation of the least powerful groups. In the context of our work with in a remote Aboriginal community school, however, we demonstrate how the development of a breakfast programme provided a group of Aboriginal women with the means to make significant changes in their local school. This study shows how the voices of Indigenous people provided the basis for an emerging set of activities that continue to have a significant impact on the relationship between school and community. In the process they have developed relationships with school staff that provide the basis for continuing changes in the way the school operates. The subtle reorientation of power differential between school staff and Aboriginal community members arising demonstrates how participatory processes provide the basis for relationships that facilitate organizational and social change.

II. THE CONTEXT: DISPARITIES IN EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

One of the most significant issues confronting Australia today is the disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and mainstream Australian children. These are far greater in degree and scope for Aboriginal children living in remote and very remote locations in Australia, who comprise over 30 percent of the Aboriginal population (ABS 2008). Continuing evidence of these stark disparities are demonstrated by the repeated findings in reports like the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS 2006) that highlights a significant gap of 30 to 40 percent in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students throughout Western Australia. This gap is magnified considerably in the remote Ngaanyatjarra region where 87 percent of Aboriginal students registered low academic performance compared with 58 percent of Aboriginal students in WA. The WAACHS survey found that:

... very little progress has been made over the past 30 years to effectively close the gaps in education resulting in limited access to lifelong learning, employment and economic benefits (Zubrick et al., 2006).

There is continuing evidence of the failure of schools in remote regions of Australia to provide the majority of Aboriginal students with even a basic education (WADET 2009; Hamilton 2009). The 2008 NAPLAN results show that Aboriginal students in Year 3 in very remote areas perform almost twice as low in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and numeracy as Aboriginal students in urban schools and almost three times lower than for non-Aboriginal students in very remote areas. The disparity across all of these areas increases by Year 7 and in addition, attendance levels in remote communities are among the lowest in the state (Somerville 2009, (WA Department of Education, 2010)). These results echo previous studies in Western Australia (Zubrick et al, 2006), the Northern Territory (Hughes et al, 2009) and

Queensland (ibid.) indicating that disparities between the academic performance of Aboriginal students in remote communities remains a major problem in Australian society.

The consequence of continuing reports of these disparities has been the development of a multitude of special policies, programmes, procedures, initiatives, projects projects and services. All have the intent of improving Aboriginal academic outcomes, and focus on a multitude of deficits observed by researchers – attention span, child socialization practices, inappropriate child behaviour, lack of family support, and so on. They also highlight the inadequacies of teachers, curriculum, learning materials, equipment and infrastructure. Many millions of dollars have been invested in Aboriginal education, but as the following section illustrates, effects on Aboriginal academic achievement have been minimal,

III. THE FAILURE OF REFORM

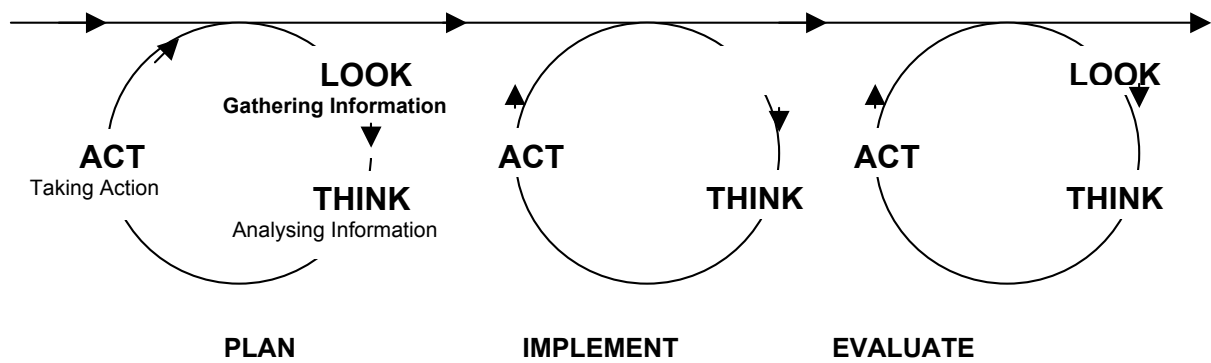
Despite the myriad of reports over many decades and programs and initiatives developed under the National Aboriginal Education Policy (1988), Commonwealth, State and Territory governments have failed to make any significant impact on Aboriginal academic outcomes. Recent COAG agreements and government interventions have likewise failed to produce evidence of any substantial sustainable gains (COAG 2008). Moreover, Indigenous students' learning outcomes declined, and the gap between Indigenous students and all students increased, as remoteness increased (Western Australia Department of Education and Training {WDET}, 2005).

Official reports and presentations from senior educational administrators continue to emphasize the need the “change the way we are doing business”. Solutions to the problem, however, continue to focus on school variables--teaching strategies, special literacy programs, teacher professional development, staffing and so on (COAG 2009, WADET/ERG Report 2009, Partnership Program 2009) — despite very strong evidence that these factors alone have little impact on academic achievement (McCaleb 1994, Stringer 2008, Silburn et al., 2006, Shepherd & Walker 2008, Zubrick et al 2006). This is not surprising considering that developmental theorists concur on the significant impact of cultural environment on child development (Vygotsky 1978, Piaget 1973, Piaget and Inhelder 1973, Bruner 1966). Though holding somewhat different views of developmental process, they agree on some of the key features of human development - that culture is the prime determinant of cognitive development; and the critical role that experiences and interactions with the surrounding environment play in student learning.

Education systems have been slow to incorporate the implications of these understandings, though in the Australian context a body of literature speaks clearly of the need for closer connections between community and school (Harrison 2007, Hewitson 2007, Thwaite (In draft), Dr Ernie Stringer 2007, Garrett 2003, Beache and Le Mare 2007, Tamisari and Milmilany 2003). There is clearly a need for a radical reorientation of thinking and practice in this area. While educators continue to focus on classroom issues they fail to grasp the need for establishing strong connections between the life of the school and the life of families and the community,

IV. ACTION RESEARCH IN A REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

For the past eighteen months the authors have engaged with groups of Aboriginal people in a remote community in Western Australia supporting activities that have emerged from their work with local family groups. They have used a model of community-based inquiry that focuses on cyclical, participatory processes by Stringer (2006). An underlying Look – Think – Act rubric provides the means to enable people to focus on an issue, reflect on the situation, and plan and implement activities. In doing so they provide the means for Aboriginal people to determine the activities in which they will engage, and the ways they will be implemented.



Iterations of this fundamental process ARE repeated as each activity or issue emerges, so that an increasing body of work and activity might be represented as a spiral of activity that extends the reach (and power) of the people. From this process a continuing series of activities emerge that suits the desires and aspirations of the people involved.

V. ENGAGING COMMUNITY

The Warburton School Breakfast Programme emerged from conversations between members of the Ngaanyatjarra Aboriginal Council and the principal of the Warburton School. In discussing ways that families in the community might assist the school to provide a better education for the children and find ways to encourage school attendance Councilors explored the possibility of starting a school breakfast programme. With the support of the principal, four grandmothers commenced a programme that provided breakfast for children at the school. Their focus was on a “healthy breakfast, comprising cereal with milk and honey, toast with baked beans or spaghetti in tomato sauce, and a drink of milo”. Using skills they had learned in an employment programme in their youth, the grandmothers quickly established a service that was efficient and effective, used exemplary food preparation and handling techniques and cleaning procedures that ensured the environment was maintained hygienically.

Initiated in Term 4 2008, the breakfast programme has been running consistently on a school-daily basis for eighteen months. Initially coordinated by a group of grandmothers, the number of workers, rostered on a weekly basis, has expanded to include more than 20 younger women from most major family groups in the community. Four to 6 women from the ‘pool’ assist on the program each day, rostered according to availability and subject to the high mobility of families between the surrounding communities and towns. The ‘caterers’ are clear on their intentions, providing a healthy breakfast that encourages early morning attendance, and enables the students to start the day in a comfortable, friendly environment with their mothers, grandmothers and other family members.

The programme is highly organized, providing children with good modeling from adult members of their families, and providing them with a better start to their day. Each morning the women arrive at the school approximately one ½ hours before school commences and set up breakfast, which commences an hour before school starts. The kids wash their hands, then stand in an orderly line to be given a bowl of cereal. When they have finished they rinse their bowls, then line up for toast and spaghetti or baked beans, eating it with relish while the women serve them warm milo. Once finished the children leave the room and the women wipe the benches clean, sweep and wash the floor, empty the rubbish bins, record their work time (for later payment) and check supplies of food for the coming days. Two women stays behind to prepare bowls of cut fruit that are delivered to children in the junior grades for morning tea.

VI. EXTENDING INFLUENCE: FROM LITTLE THINGS, BIG THINGS GROW

Since the initiation of the breakfast programme the women involved have extended their activities considerably including catering, training, the development of resources, and giving presentations about their pursuits. These activities have emerged as the women identify areas of interest in which they can

apply their skills. Weekly meetings are held to assist in the coordination of these activities and a building near completion has been erected on the school grounds as a space to nurture and expand on the women's activities.

Initially the catering commenced with school-based events including Open Days and Sports Days. Last year the women catered for the regional schools carnival, providing 1800 meals to 300 participants over two days, a role that had previously been held by the schoolteachers. They now run a catering service that provides meals to other groups that gather in the community for workshops and meetings, rapidly expanding their repertoire of recipes and resulting in requests from the women for formal training in hospitality and culinary skills. The quality of the food they serve at the events is regularly being remarked on by many of the recipients.

They also provide presentations at conferences and similar events, an activity that is increasing their capacity to promote and extend their activities. They have produced a series of displays describing many facets of their work, which have been shown both in and out of the community. Recently they have started create a series of books using photographs of their activities that they hope will enable them to contribute to their children's learning. They have participated in the creation of a number of short DVDs, which were recently used as part of their training of women in a neighboring community who wished to replicate the breakfast program at their school. On a number of occasions where the women have needed more hands on deck, they have requested the assistance of high school students in their catering activities, providing a strong base for future multigenerational training.

From the perspective of the authors the women act as a conduit between the school and the community. They now provide informal advice to the principal, either approaching him to meet with them, or providing an audience when he wishes to explore issues related to the operation of the school. Many of the teachers have had little experience in the context of remote Aboriginal communities and the breakfast women provide them with a link to the families of their students. The women provide support to the school attendance officer informing them of the movement of families around the region. Following breakfast women will occasionally stay at the school, dropping into their children's classes or assisting with the discipline of unruly children. The presence of the women at the school has undoubtedly encouraged other parents to feel comfortable in the school grounds, coming in to drop their kids off, or visiting at morning tea and lunchtimes.

VII. GIVING VOICE: THE POWER OF SUBSTANTIAL PRESENCE

Empowerment is often interpreted in political or activist terms as people seizing power, taking control, or engaging in conflictual struggle to attain ends and objectives aligned with their own needs. As Foucault (1972) suggested, however, any attempt to describe power at the level of the state or institution requires us to "conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting From its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been —and continue to be—invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc., by every more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination. (p. 159)

According to this analysis, oppression is as much the product of everyday, taken-for-granted ways in which people in positions of power (teachers, principals, etc) plan and organize their institutional lives. Domination and control are maintained through the unconsciously accepted routine practices people use in their occupational lives. Foucault therefore suggests that the way to eliminate the "fascism within our heads is to explore and build on the open qualities of human discourse and thereby intervene in the way knowledge (and practices) are instituted at the particular sites where a localized power-discourse prevails.

It is our contention that it is possible for people at the local level to take control of the ways that practices are enacted, and thereby take control of the techniques and tactics they use to work within the system. In this way they are able, little by little, to deconstruct the texts of social life, and make gradual,

systematic changes in the operations of the institutions and organizations within which they work. By working transparently and with the consent and support of people in positions of control they are able to change the routine practices and their underpinning operations, engaging social change as an act of service.

The processes described above demonstrate the power of the “quiet voice”, the women engaging in practical activities apparently only marginally relevant to the “real” work of the school. They have, however, established a presence that continues to extend the reach of their activities, and to have a significant impact on the life of the school. They provide the principal and teachers with direct access to knowledge and understanding about community life, to provide an avenue of communication with families, and to provide advice and support to actions related to school and community issues.

All of this has been welcomed by the school principal and teachers, who previously had very limited understanding of events in the community, or access to information about families. The principal has indicated that his “door is always open” to the women, and their continuing presence effect the students and other members of the community. In the hour before school commences, during the operation of the breakfast programme, the women “own” the school, in metaphoric terms, and their substantial presence at all special events is clearly evident. Though still in its early phases it is clear that they will continue to extend their activities and to enter more fully into classroom activities. Through the literature they are now producing they will insert themselves into the knowledge production processes that are a central aspect of schooling and which, to date, has been fully controlled by the State bureaucracy through non-Aboriginal school staff.

This control exercised by the women through the ongoing operation of their activities ensures that the mandates of the department and the principal will no longer be the only voices in the school. Though they may still dominate for some years to come, the continuingly extended activities of the women provide the basis for significant change in the orientation of teaching/learning, and the operation of the school.

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