

Indigenous Australians as ‘No Gaps’ Subjects

Education and Development in Remote Australia

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Introduction

In February 2008 the Australian Prime Minister made an apology to the ‘Stolen Generations’ on behalf of the nation. Since then, we have witnessed the rapid implementation of a policy framework focused on ‘Closing the gap’ and an increasingly complex, managerial and technical approach to addressing undeniable Indigenous disadvantage. This approach has been endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). As policy has become more monolithic and monopolistic, the state has become less sympathetic to the diversity and difference that is a feature of Indigenous societies, especially in remote Australia.

At one level the goal of current policy is little different from the broad assimilationist aims of the past 50 years, except that the more polite term ‘normalisation’ is increasingly used. At another level, the nature of the state has changed from Keynesian welfarism to an embrace of neoliberalism that has served Australia well at the macroeconomic level in recent years.

In this chapter we want to problematise the notion that closing the gap in education will improve socioeconomic outcomes. In short, we question whether human capital theory that is so uncritically accepted as an elixir to socioeconomic disadvantage is applicable in all cross- or inter-cultural contexts, or in all territorial spaces.

We base our challenge on some fundamental paradoxes in Australia. While available statistics since 1971 show socioeconomic gaps in all jurisdictions, the focus of the current National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) is on remote Australia – where only 25 per cent of the Indigenous population lives. This is also the region where Indigenous people predominantly live in small discrete communities, on Aboriginal-owned land. Many of these people are now looking to make a livelihood from their land, using a diversity of approaches. It is unlikely that there will be sufficient standard mainstream employment opportunities in remote Australia to close the gap or that all people will migrate from their land. Hence, making a livelihood will also require participation in the customary, or non-market sector, of the economy.

In our view, education needs to be tailored to serve the livelihood aspirations of Indigenous people participating in a hybrid and intercultural economy. Such an alternative development future is illustrated in this chapter with reference to natural and cultural resource management. Rather than providing mainstream education for futures in the market (sometimes called the ‘real’) economy, consideration also needs to be given to educational innovation to meet diverse vocational needs in the hybrid economy. In conclusion, we ponder how the current hegemonic focus on closing the gap, in statistical terms only, might be modified to contemplate such a possibility.

Closing the gap as a policy framework

In February 2008 the new Rudd government (Rudd 2008), on the very first day of parliamentary sitting, made a belated national apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples on behalf of the nation. The apology was in two parts. The first very moving and compassionate part focused on the past, reflecting on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations – ‘this blemished chapter in our nation’s history’ – and reminded Australia that such practice continued until the early 1970s.

The second part switched from the symbolic to the practical, from the particularity of the Stolen Generations to the generality of Indigenous Australians and their contemporary socioeconomic marginality, from the past to the present and future. Here the focus was on building a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – a bridge based on a partnership to ‘close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities’. In aiming to close the gap, the Prime Minister set concrete targets for the future: to *halve* the *widening* gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes,

opportunities for Indigenous children and infant mortality rates *within* a decade; and to close the appalling 17-year gap in overall life expectancy *within a generation* [emphasis ours]. It is noteworthy that the extraordinary diversity of Indigenous circumstances barely rated a mention in the apology speech. The Australian Government committed to report annually on progress in meeting these gaps. The apology was widely acclaimed nationally and internationally.

It is the second part of the speech on which we focus. 'Closing the Gap' was quickly adopted by COAG – the key intergovernmental forum in Australia's federal system – as its over-arching reform agenda for the project of improvement for Indigenous Australians. During 2008 and 2009 the Prime Minister's ambitious targets to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across urban, rural and remote areas were adopted by all governments, although in four of the six targets (mortality rates for children under five; reading, writing and numeracy levels; Year 12 attainment rates; and employment outcomes) 'closing' was used loosely, if somewhat more realistically, to mean halving. At face value such ambitious goals are precisely what the wealthy Australian state – here referring to the Commonwealth and state and territory constellation of political institutions and bureaucratic fields – should be doing to address historically entrenched Indigenous marginality.

Since February 2008 considerable effort has been made by COAG to complete a very complex National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) that was signed off by all governments in July 2009. At the heart of NIRA is an expanding series of National Partnership Agreements that have seen unprecedented financial commitments of billions of dollars and a shared inter-governmental view on how Indigenous disadvantage should be addressed (COAG 2009). Much of the focus of NIRA is to ensure transparency and accountability in what is being spent on Indigenous citizens. But even as NIRA was being endorsed in July 2009 (COAG 2009), the Productivity Commission, the Australian Government's independent research and advisory body on a range of issues affecting the welfare of Australians, was sounding some warnings. In its biennial *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009* report, the commission highlighted the possibility that gaps may still be growing and that in a number of areas statistical instruments are not available to measure movements in the gaps so meticulously plotted in NIRA (Productivity Commission 2009). These findings replicate independent academic research by Altman et al. (2008), which tracks changes in Indigenous socioeconomic outcomes, in absolute and relative terms, between 1971 and 2006 censuses. This research shows that at the national level things are improving slowly in absolute terms, but that in relative terms gaps are

persisting across most indicators; it also makes some very pessimistic forecasts on the likelihood of gap closure based on historical trends.

A critique of Closing the Gap

All Australian governments in the modern policy era have looked to close the gap, even though comprehensive statistics from the national census to measure progress have been available only since 1971. The Closing the Gap framework can be heavily critiqued from an anthropology of development perspective, or a broader social sciences perspective. Indeed this has already been done in another context.¹ Here, we focus our critique on just three aspects of the new framework.

First, its targets have not been based on any consultations with the subjects of the project of improvement. This was noted by the Productivity Commission (2009) as NIRA was launched: what works includes cooperative approaches between the state and community that are bottom up and participatory rather than top down in design.

Second, deeply entrenched development problems have been rendered statistical to such an extent that the Closing the Gap goals have almost become abstractions divorced from the lived reality of Indigenous subjects. This is what Ferguson (1994) has termed rendering development problems technical so as to seek technical, managerialist solutions. It is also a means to depoliticise the problem, the state project of improvement instrumentally operating as an 'anti-politics machine' that fails to address politico-economic relationships that are the structural and historical sources of inequality (Li 2007). This narrows the frame of the public discourse, closing the space for pluralism and diversity. Importantly, the voice from the local, or of the subject, is effectively marginalised and silenced.

Third, the nature of the principles articulated to achieve Closing the Gap outcomes makes no concession either to diversity of Indigenous circumstances or to Indigenous subjects adhering to beliefs, values, social relations and practices that can remain distinct from mainstream norms. In Australia there is a recognition in social sciences scholarship that probably everywhere Indigenous social norms retain a degree of contestation between customary and western norms. These norms are manifest in diverse combinations that are termed intercultural or bicultural.

At one level this new state goal to normalise Indigenous subjects by closing the gaps and assuming shared social norms is not new at all. In 1961, it was stated:

The policy of assimilation means in the view of all Australian governments that all aborigines and part aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same living as other Australians... enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians. (Altman and Nieuwenhuysen 1979, 24)

In 2009, the NIRA principles suggested that investments should aim to improve participation in education or training and in the market economy and to reduce welfare dependence, but also to alter behaviour by promoting personal responsibility and behaviours consistent with positive social norms (COAG 2009, E-79). Exactly whose social norms are deemed positive is unaddressed. Probably for the first time ever the Australian state has explicitly articulated a goal to bring Indigenous human action into the domain of the market. The similarities between 1961 and 2009 indicate adherence to a highly problematic form of evolutionary thinking linked to the modernisation paradigm.

At another level, the neoliberal state is different from the Keynesian welfare state, although both were transnational political projects in advanced societies. In particular, neoliberalism seeks economic deregulation and the wholesale adoption of market or market-like mechanisms; redefinition of subjects, not as citizens with rights, but as clients to be managed; and a cultural trope of individual responsibility and an expansion of intrusive state institutions (Wacquant 2009).² Indeed, theorists like Wacquant would identify this as a classic example of the capitalist revolution from above in the era of triumphant neoliberalism. Scott (2009) might see this, unsurprisingly, as part of the state project to homogenise communities and view the ideal civilised subject as the 'no gaps' subject. There is no doubt that the neoliberal state's framing can be viewed as a means to creatively destroy distinct Indigenous institutions in the name of individualism, private property and the market, as suggested in global contexts by Harvey (2005). Bourdieu (1998) asks rhetorically whether neoliberalism is just a program for destroying collective structures that impede pure market logic.

Remote Indigenous Australia: People, land and economy

What is clear from available statistics is that while inequalities between Indigenous and other Australians are evident everywhere, they are greatest in remote or sparsely settled regions (termed in the Accessibility/Remoteness

Index of Australia as remote and very remote). Geographically, these regions cover 86 per cent of the Australian continent. In population terms, 26 per cent of Australia's estimated Indigenous population of 517,000 live remotely, compared with only two per cent of the non-Indigenous population (of just under 22 million). A combination of factors, including demographic proportion and a narrative of 'recent' failure, has seen much of the focus in NIRA on these communities.

We shift our focus now from abstract statistical notions of gap closing to empirical remote Australia today. We highlight this region for several reasons, including the paradox that, while a disproportionate policy focus is on remote Australia, prospects for closing the gap here are poorest, owing to linked structural, historical and cultural reasons. We are not saying that such policy focus is not warranted, only that in terms of statistical targets, outcomes in remote Australia are likely to be most difficult to achieve, according to the normative social indicators that are used to define these targets.

In Figure 9.1, the distribution of discrete Indigenous communities in remote Australia is provided. There are an estimated 100,000 Indigenous people living in 1200 discrete communities in this region, nearly 1000 called 'homelands' or 'outstations', with a population of less than 100. This in itself presents a major challenge for the state in universal provision of services. Hence the new national principle to focus infrastructure support and service provision on larger and more economically sustainable communities, despite no evidence that socioeconomic status improves for those moving up the settlement hierarchy (Biddle 2009). One must ask for whose benefit is such centralisation being advocated if not yet implemented?

Equally paradoxically, over 99 per cent of Indigenous-owned land is in remote Australia, with over 20 per cent forming a part of the Indigenous estate estimated at some 1.5 million square kilometres. The restitution of ancestral lands to traditional owners has occurred slowly over the past 30 years via an array of land rights and native title laws, some passed for social justice reasons, others as a result of judicial decisions. In most cases Indigenous land owners have needed to demonstrate legal continuity of customs and traditions and of connections to qualify under Australian law as traditional owners of their ancestral lands. The relatively late encroachment of colonisation on remote Australia meant that much land here was either belatedly reserved by the colonial state for Aboriginal people, or unalienated and available for land claim. Land rights have empowered remote communities to pursue different livelihoods, as well as a degree of

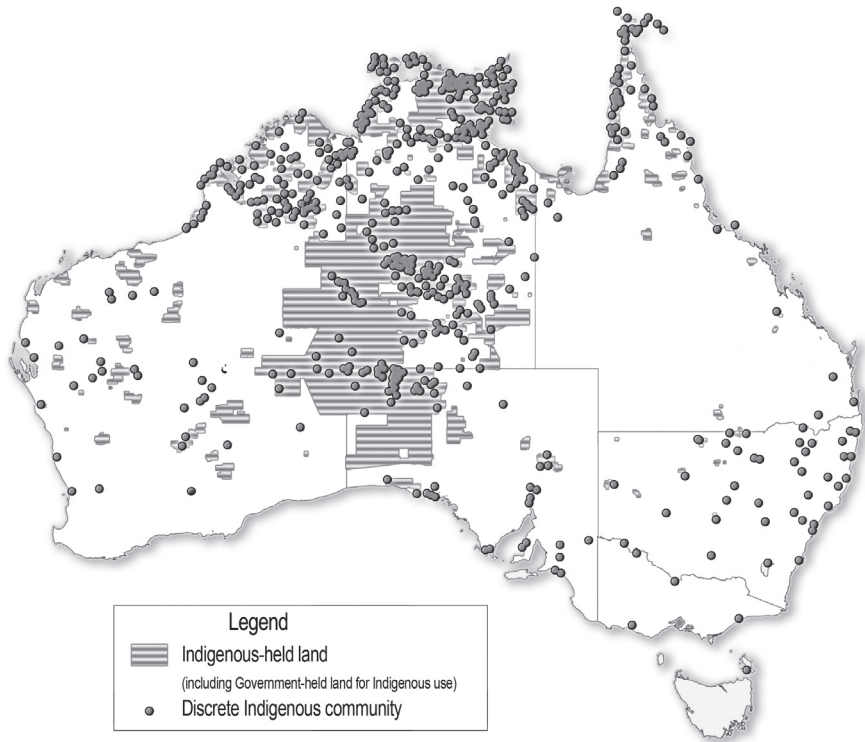


Figure 9.1: Discrete Indigenous communities and Indigenous-owned land

Source: Adapted from Altman et al. 2007.

leverage, to negotiate with commercial interests. In the remotest places Indigenous people are almost beyond the reach of the state and may have learnt 'the art of not being governed' (Scott 2009). On Aboriginal land, groups have been able to maintain beliefs, values, kin-based social relations, languages and practices that are non-mainstream and distinctly Indigenous, although, as noted earlier, these ways of being are modern and intercultural rather than pre-colonial.³

Nadasdy (2003), in his study of bureaucrats and hunters, notes, with reference to Weber's work on the nature of bureaucracy, that the development of a money economy is a presupposition of the bureaucracy, as is the current Australian state supposition that development (and closing the gap) will require a full embrace of the market economy. But the relatively late colonisation of remote Australia resulted in a less destructive transformation of the pre-colonial hunter-gatherer economy and today important elements of the customary (or non-market) economy

remain intact. This provides a means to maintain land-based ways of life in many situations and has resulted in the emergence of a complex form of hybrid economy that includes state, market and customary sectors (Altman 2009b). This economic reality in remote areas is actualised through an array of sectoral overlaps that influence everyday livelihood strategies. An example that we will return to below is when rangers are employed by the state to provide environmental services using Indigenous knowledge, while at the same time being at liberty to harvest wildlife for domestic use. The hybrid economy model illustrated in Figure 9.2 properly illustrates the complex nature of Indigenous economies in remote Australia beyond the usual private and public duality.

The hybrid economy is different everywhere, in form and in the nature of sectoral overlaps (areas 4, 5, 6 and 7 in Figure 9.2), where most productive activity is undertaken. This is partly explained by structural, cultural and environmental factors. In some places market opportunities in mining or tourism employment might exist. In all situations the precise nature of interculturality, the trade-offs individuals and groups make between engagements in kin-based domestic moral economies or market-based opportunity vary, as does the availability of game or access to fisheries. The existence and resilience of a customary sector is anathema to neoliberalism and its goal of bringing all human action within the realm of the market (Harvey 2005). For many Indigenous groups, however, it provides a means to reduce dependency and associated risk of excessive state intrusion, and to preserve customary ways and to live by them.

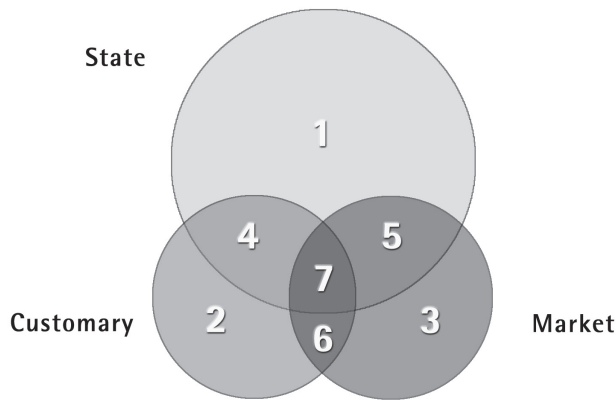


Figure 9.2: The hybrid economy model

Source: Altman 2009b.

Development futures in the hybrid economy

Land and native title rights have facilitated the maintenance of hybrid economies and the emergence of what Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) have termed 'Ethnicity, Inc', the dialectical relationship between the often legal corporatisation of identity and the commodification of culture, sometimes requiring protection using 'lawfare'. Like Comaroff and Comaroff, we do not seek to present this emergence as unproblematic – indeed in Australia the 'repressive authenticity' (Wolfe 1999) and contested identity politics required to claim back land invariably result in conflict in the Indigenous domain and the emergence of winners and losers, although the extent of such competition for land is influenced greatly by region and variable colonial histories. Similarly, the commodification of culture – in tourism, the arts or, most recently, in the provision of environmental services utilising Indigenous knowledge – can be highly problematic.

The growth and diversification of the Indigenous visual arts sector in remote Australia has been a well-documented exemplar of intercultural production in the hybrid economy. Artistic production draws its inspiration from connections to land, the sentient landscape and the sacred places in that landscape that are owned by groups of land owners and that are sometimes enacted in ceremonial contexts. Aboriginal art embodies cultural values that have a high degree of commensurability with western aesthetics and economic values. The value of this sector has probably grown tenfold in the past 20 years as new place- and identity-based movements continue to spring up. The production and marketing of art sits squarely in the intersection of customary, state and market sectors: inspiration and skills acquisition is customary, while cross-cultural mediation with the market requires state patronage.

Perhaps of even greater potential is the emergence over the past decade or so of an Indigenous community-based, grassroots, 'caring for country' movement that is seeing the use of Indigenous and local knowledge in the paid provision of a range of environmental services. It has been estimated that in 2006 just on 400 Aboriginal people were employed as rangers in the northernmost part of the Northern Territory (Northern Land Council 2006, 11) compared with 176 Aboriginal people employed in the mining industry throughout the Northern Territory (in the 2006 Census).

The Indigenous estate that covers 20 per cent of the continent includes some of the most biodiverse lands in Australia. Official natural resource atlas maps indicate that many of the most intact and nationally important wetlands, riparian zones, forests, rivers and waterways are located on the

Indigenous estate. Mapping also shows that these lands are at risk of species contraction and face major threats from feral animals, exotic weeds, changed fire regimes, pollution and over-grazing (Altman et al. 2007). On top of these threats, the latest available climate science suggests that substantial biodiversity impacts on this crucial part of the continental landmass are inevitable.

In the face of this, there has been a slowly growing support from state environmental agencies for Indigenous community-based efforts to ameliorate threats and minimise adverse biodiversity outcomes. Since 1997, 33 Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) have been declared over 230,000 square kilometres of Aboriginal-owned land that features natural and cultural heritage values and that will be managed using forms of management that satisfy International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) guidelines. IPAs make up 23 per cent of Australia's National Reserve System and there are plans to increase national coverage by 40 per cent in the next five years. In 2007 a Working on Country program was established to pay Indigenous rangers wages that had previously been garnered from a range of sources, including the Community Development Employment Program and the Natural Heritage Trust. Figure 9.3 shows the location of the 33 declared IPAs; there is a high correlation between IPAs and people living on their land at small outstation communities.

In late 2007 a research project titled 'People on country, healthy landscapes and Indigenous economic futures' was established (CAEPR 2009) to work with seven community-based Caring for Country projects in the Northern Territory (and one in Western Australia), four of which are now declared IPAs. The projects cover about 70,000 square kilometres and employ just over 100 rangers.

The two most recent IPA declarations in September 2009 (numbers 32 and 33) are Warddeken and Djelk in western Arnhem Land and are two of our research partners; they are people with whom we have collaborated for many years. We provide two vignettes about these new IPAs as exemplars of what activities IPA rangers actually undertake.

Case 1 – Warddeken Land Management Ltd: The Warddeken IPA is declared over 14,000 square kilometres of Arnhem Land escarpment as an IUCN, Category VI protected area, with sustainable use of natural resources. Twelve employed Manworrk Rangers work with traditional owners from over 30 clans to undertake feral species management, record Indigenous knowledge, manage critical aquatic habitats, record native biodiversity health, undertake

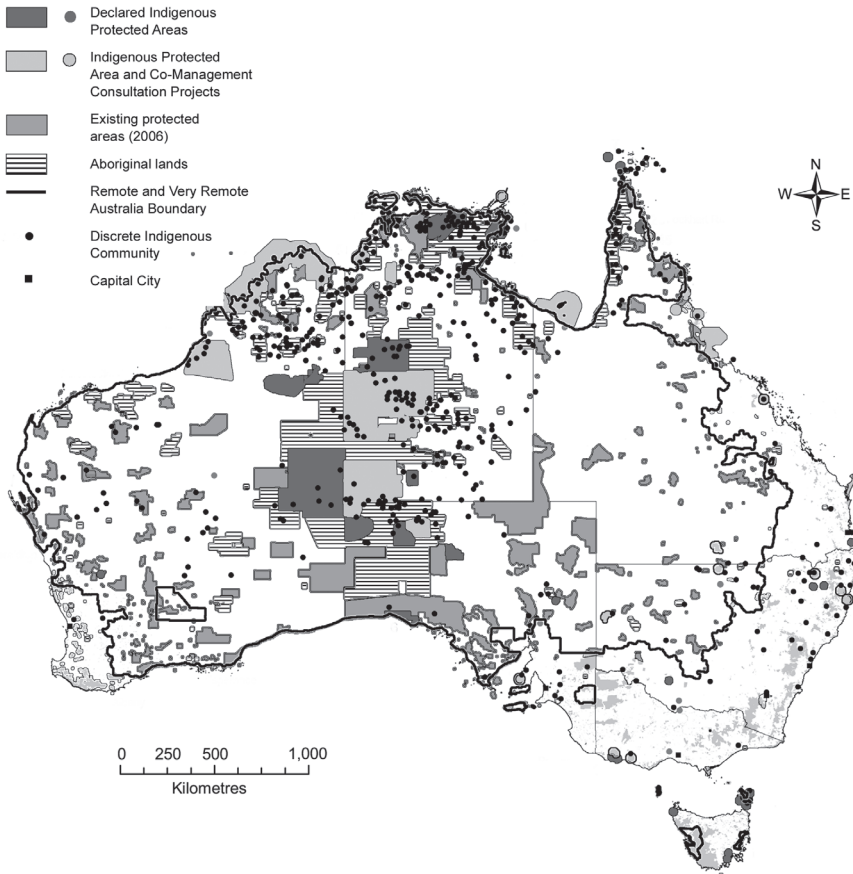


Figure 9.3: Indigenous protected areas and discrete Indigenous communities

Source: Based on <http://www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/ipa/map.html>.

species autopsy for Australian Quarantine, and participate as core partners in the West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement (WALFA) project. Funds to manage of the Warddeken IPA are sourced primarily from government (75 per cent) but also from private and philanthropic sources (25 per cent). The WALFA project is Australia's only carbon abatement project that has a contract with a multinational corporation to abate a verified 100,000 tonnes of carbon-equivalent greenhouse gases per annum. The Manworrk Rangers have a heavy focus on partnerships with neighbouring ranger groups (like Djelk) as well as scientific, environmental, academic and cultural interest groups. The Warddeken IPA aims to create a reserve of international significance (Warddeken Land Management Ltd 2009).

Case 2 – Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation Djelk Rangers: The Djelk IPA is declared over 6700 square kilometres of Arnhem Land as an IUCN Category VI protected area, with sustainable use of natural resources. The Djelk Rangers have operated as a community-based Caring for Country project since 1991; currently 30 are employed in land and sea management. In collaboration with traditional owners from 102 clans, rangers undertake prescribed burning to reduce fuel load as part of the WALFA project and use cybertracking technology to accurately monitor burning work. They also undertake feral animal control and exotic weed management and provide cultural and economic site protection. The Sea Rangers undertake marine management and marine debris control over 2000 square kilometres of sea country that will be declared as a protected area in 2010. Women rangers mainly engage in commercial utilisation of wildlife and in bush food enterprises. In 2008–09, the Djelk Rangers undertook 20,800 kilometres of coastal patrols, 8800 kilometres of aerial prescribed burn and 14,000 kilometres of ground burning covering 11,500 square kilometres. Income is earned from WALFA as well as commercial sale of wildlife (mainly estuarine crocodiles and turtles) and the provision of surveillance services under contract to Australian Customs and Australian Quarantine. The Djelk Rangers collaborate in a junior rangers program with the local Maningrida Community Education Centre to provide students with access to country and knowledge transfer from rangers' work (Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation 2009; Schwab 2006).

Education for diverse futures

Finally, we get to education. We have used working on country as an example of a particular form of intercultural enterprise, largely underwritten by the state, where participants recognise the need to combine two tool-kits – Indigenous local knowledge and western science and technology. It is noteworthy that, in the two cases we refer to, rangers are using sophisticated cybertracking, global positioning and satellite surveillance technology and state-of-the-art approaches to manage wild fires, feral animals, exotic weeds and marine pollution – while also drawing on deep Indigenous knowledge on seasonality, the environment and species behaviour. Traditional owner governance of common property is also fundamental to these environmental services enterprises. In remote education there is an emerging dialectical relationship between rangers, providing opportunity for Indigenous and scientific knowledge transfer to school students, which simultaneously

provides a conduit to improved school attendance, pathways to skills development, literacy and numeracy acquisition and employment on country.

However, education in remote areas has become a key agent of the neoliberal state's renewed project of modernisation and market-driven notions of success (Wheelahan 2010). Mirroring much of the discourse surrounding employment in the 'real economy' and 'development' as a highly individualised pursuit, the frame through which education is currently being viewed has become increasingly narrow; the aim has become to close the gap. There is no doubting that education for Indigenous students has long been an incredibly complex and challenging policy arena. Difficulties in delivery, logistics, staff retention and quality, purpose and connections to employment have long vexed the sector. Indeed, we do not offer any definitive solutions to such complexity here. Rather, we challenge the current hegemony in thinking about this issue.

While formal educational outcomes in remote Indigenous education in Australia are consistently poor, the discourse in public debate has increasingly ignored the critiques of standardised benchmarking and the complexities of remote educational delivery. For example, 2008 and 2009 National Assessment in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results⁴ have been instrumental in showing that Indigenous students in remote areas are performing markedly worse against these benchmarks than their non-Indigenous peers in the rest of Australia.⁵ Yet, without wishing to 'problem deflate', there is some question as to what such benchmarks are actually testing. Since Thorndike invented formal achievement tests in the early twentieth century, they have been heavily critiqued, particularly in their application to minority populations. As McKenna (1977, 8) noted over 30 years ago, 'such tests use vocabularies and illustrations unfamiliar to those who are not of white middle class cultures or for whom English is a second language: that is, the tests are culturally and linguistically biased'.

Similarly, for over four decades statistics show the poor attendance at school by Indigenous students in Australia, particularly in remote areas. Recent research in the Northern Territory has shown that in some areas, on any given day, as few as a quarter of the potential school-aged cohort are actually going to school (Taylor and Stanley 2005). However, it is also clear that low levels of attainment and attendance are linked to poverty, poor health, inadequate housing, inequitable access to government services (including schools) and low socioeconomic status (MCEETYA 1999, 21). The links between such barriers and attendance are well documented in the international education literature, regardless of ethnicity or location.

While none of this is new, it is surprising that the dominant narrative of policy debate has instead cast the disengagement of Indigenous students as a function of the economic ‘failure’ or unsustainability of remote Indigenous communities, welfare dependence and/or irresponsible parenting (Pearson 2009; Hughes 2007). Such discursive positions are replete with ‘the politics of crisis’ and demand prescriptive pedagogic integration, punitive measures against parents and the physical relocation of the educative process away from remote areas. This is especially the case in relation to small outstation schools. COAG (2009, 79) notes that while there is recognition of Indigenous peoples’ cultural connections to homelands, policy will now avoid ‘expectations of major investment in service provision where there are few economic or educational opportunities’. No research has been undertaken to assess the comparative performance of such schools.

While literacy and numeracy outcomes have increasingly come to represent the whole of education, instead of just one part, the function and form of education in remote areas has stagnated. The national policy remedy seems to be a concerted effort to supply more of the same prescriptive pedagogic solutions. Meanwhile, the need for educational programs geared to the intercultural and multilingual realities of daily life in remote contexts is being ignored by educationalists, policy makers and bureaucrats. There appears to be no capacity to reflexively consider the ‘crossed purposes’ (Folds 2001) in educational provision, or any capacity to rigorously assess the value or actual performance of past and current experimentation with ‘two-way’ (Harris 1990) and bilingual education, which is in the process of being dismantled in the Northern Territory (Simpson et al. 2009).

The challenge we wish to highlight is embodied in the following questions: How can a future in remote regions that entails life, employment and activity in a hybrid economic reality be augmented and supported by an appropriate ‘hybrid’ pedagogic structure? Is education in remote Indigenous Australia providing the skills and knowledge needed by students to maximise their life chances in the extremely restricted labour markets in which most will be engaging and competing in the immediate future?

There is an obvious related question: To what extent is the neoliberal state able to countenance a level of plurality in curriculum design and delivery specifically for remote Indigenous students? Given the imminent advent of a national curriculum in Australia, which has already been released in draft form, the answer may be: Very little. Despite this, there is increasing evidence that strong pedagogic design based in the local can provide for skill sets that are transferable to the global employment market, allowing Indigenous

students mobility beyond their home community labour market. Clearly, such an approach would require commitments to research and educational provision far beyond current policy settings or imaginings.

In analysing some of these issues, researchers at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) have been examining the links between education, training and Indigenous futures, including pathways, links and synergies between Indigenous land and sea management and education in remote communities (Fordham and Schwab 2007). They have found that schools and rangers, for example, are engaging in innovative programs in a few remote sites like the Djelk example above, without policy or institutional support, and without any recognition of their role in re-engaging Indigenous students and the community in education processes. As a recent and growing employment pathway, Indigenous land and sea management is not supported by appropriate educational development. This is despite the fact that there are many more employed in ranger work than in mining in jurisdictions like the Northern Territory. We are concerned about the myopic return to abstract human capital theory, as in the NIRA, that links education and training with employment in the mainstream labour market, without considering backgrounds, aspirations, location, opportunities or institutional settings.

We do not question that a focus on literacy should remain a high educational priority, but sufficient resources are also required to provide local Indigenous knowledge and science-related curricula that our research indicates will be beneficial to NAPLAN outcomes. At the same time, there is an urgent need for solid pedagogical foundations that will allow the development of the skills and understandings essential for future employment in land, sea and resource management. Such a learning program would involve customary skills and knowledge, life skills and ranger skills, delivered both within the classroom and on country, utilising the specialist knowledge of teachers, rangers, scientific experts and the community, including senior traditional owners of land who are Indigenous and vernacular knowledge specialists (Evans 2009).

Challenging the dominant policy paradigm

The NIRA, with its apparent shared goals and authoritarian moralism signed off by all Australian governments, might suggest that the neoliberal state is monolithic and monopolistic. However, as Wacquant (2009, 289) reminds us, in his reading of Pierre Bourdieu, the state cannot be construed as monolithic but rather as a splintered space of forces vying over the definition and distribution of public goods in what he terms 'the bureaucratic field'.

Today the bureaucratic field is locked in struggle between what Bourdieu identifies as the Right Hand and Left Hand of the state. At present the Right Hand appears to be in the ascendancy, shaping both discourse and policy, to transform Aboriginal societies from being welfare dependent, communal and gap ridden, to being employed, individualistic and gap free. And yet the Left Hand has championed the development and growth of new programs; clearly there is a degree of values commensurability between the environment department and the desire of Indigenous people living on the land they own to continue doing so, to manage it, and strive to restore environmental values or ensure their maintenance. At the same time, the environment department pays lip service to the Right Hand with its published material noting that 'employment is supported by the Australian Government as part of Closing the Gap under the Working on Country Program' (Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts 2009, 2).

Clearly, Aboriginal groups need to learn similar strategic skills to ensure that in the political power/knowledge struggles their diverse perspectives are clearly heard (Bourdieu 1991). This in turn will require diverse education so that an expert Indigenous discourse is readily available for the debates over key emerging issues like global warming, climate change and biodiversity protection. Importantly, this must include contributions that Indigenous knowledge systems and hybrid economies in remote Australia can make to the national interest. At the same time, both the neoliberal state and Indigenous communities need to negotiate for educational approaches that maximise, rather than foreclose, opportunities in whatever sector of the hybrid economy Indigenous people choose to participate, bearing in mind the reality of considerable occupational mobility between sectors. The rich Australian state needs to consider innovative forms of educational provision rather than assuming one approach will suit all. Aboriginal people need to have the option to live in two worlds, but also between them.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have focused on remote Australia in part because so much of current Australian policy is focused there, but also because the neoliberal state's goal of closing the gap will be most difficult to achieve in such situations. We note a fundamental tension between this goal, with its emphasis on sameness and homogenisation, and Indigenous aspirations for self-determination, choice, diversity and difference. There is a clear

tension between the goals of statistical equality and ethnic plurality, with the former currently in the ascendancy in policy discourse and practice. The powerful neoliberal state is unwilling to consider investment in small and dispersed Indigenous communities or to provide real choice to land-linked Indigenous groups. As Blaser (2004) notes, state development projects and Indigenous life projects may be very different; in much of the material we have presented they clearly are, but not in all cases.

We are concerned that NIRA might, to paraphrase Edelman (1977), amount to 'an agreement that succeeds but with policies that fail'. Closing the gap is part of a national narrative that the rich Australian state needs to construct to avoid domestic and international embarrassment. But the state also needs to heed the warnings of theorists like Ferguson (1994) and Li (2007) and its own Productivity Commission (2009) that development cannot be imposed in a technical and managerial manner from above: it will require partnership and especially opportunity for communities to shape the diverse forms of development that they aspire to have.

Just as closing the gap requires recognition of cultural and structural difference and diversity, so educational approaches will need to consider particular local needs and aspirations, including for bilingual education and vocationally oriented practical skills acquisition. At present the entire focus of education policy is on imagined approaches to meet national benchmarks that, even if met, are only calibrated to ensure success in the mainstream. There is need to consider other forms of education that might better serve those looking for robust engagement in hybrid economies in remote Australia.

Endnotes

- 1 Elsewhere Altman has critiqued the framework from a number of perspectives: development by numbers; project of improvement defined by the Australian state, rendered technical; while appearing to be statistically based, statistics in fact are abstractions that have little to do with local solutions and cultures; fundamentally reflects a discourse of power; reflects western not Indigenous notions of outcomes; and that social norms of dominant society, reflected in statistical measures, ignore different lifeworlds etc (see Altman 2009a).
- 2 The Australian Institute of Criminology (2009) reports Indigenous imprisonment rates increased from 1653 per 100,000 in 2000 to 2223 per 100,000 in 2008. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous imprisonment rates increased from 13.5 times to 17.2 times.
- 3 This is very clearly evident across a range of language and culture and social networks and support variables reported in the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2008* (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009). For example, 73 per cent of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over in remote Australia spoke, or spoke some words of, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language.

- 4 NAPLAN results are reported using five national achievement scales, one for each of the NAPLAN assessment domains of Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation, and Numeracy. Each scale consists of 10 bands, which represent the increasing complexity of the skills and understandings assessed by NAPLAN from Years 3 to 9 (MCEECDYA 2009).
- 5 For example, 90 per cent of students nationally are performing at or above the national minimum standard in each of the key areas assessed, as opposed to the results in the Northern Territory where 14 per cent of very remote Indigenous students met the national reading standard for Year 3, eight per cent for Year 5, 14 per cent for Year 7, and 13 per cent for Year 9 (Gillard 2008).

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