

A Share in the Future . . . Only for Those Who Become Like 'Us'!: Challenging the 'Standardisation' Reform Approach to Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory

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The global standardization reform movement in education has seduced many Indigenous education policy makers in Australia, providing a powerful neoliberal discourse to further consolidate their focus on Indigenous educational deficit. *A Share in the Future*, the latest review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory is an exemplar in this regard. This paper offers a brief exposition of this review, highlighting how an exclusive focus on comparative statistics and standardised testing of English literacy and numeracy works to maintain the coupling of 'Indigenous' and 'deficit', reifying colonial power relations and justifying technical and bureaucratic educational approaches, administered and monitored from afar. Such an approach is unable to adequately respond to the relational, cultural and linguistic complexities and nuances of local Indigenous education contexts. The educational assumptions and propositions of *A Share in the Future* will be juxtaposed with those of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project, undertaken in the Northern Territory in 2008, to consider alternative ways of successfully engaging these local educational complexities.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous education, deficit discourse, colonial power relations, standardization, strengths-based approaches

In May 2014, the latest review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, titled *A Share in the Future*, was released (Wilson, 2014). It represents 'the first comprehensive review of Indigenous education in the NT since *Learning Lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory* reported in 1999' (Wilson, 2014, p. 7). As the policy recommendations from this review have been accepted by the NT Department of Education (Chandler, 2014), it occupies a critically important space, and will impact directly on the lives of many Indigenous children in the NT. The review is rationalised on the basis that 'children now in our (NT) schools and those yet to arrive deserve better' (Wilson, 2014, p.7). Yet the questions need to be asked, what does 'better' mean in these intercultural educational contexts? And critically, whose voices should be included in discussions and determinations about the purposes and processes of schooling? In *A Share in the Future*, a 'pragmatic decision' was made to focus on 'the English language skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system' (Wilson, 2014,

p.7). Here educational success for Indigenous children is defined exclusively in terms of a set of standardized western educational benchmarks for English literacy and numeracy.

While this standardised educational data offers one valid perspective on schooling in the NT, and should be considered as such, the almost exclusive focus taken in *A Share in the Future* is problematic. Firstly, in doing so, the review constructs an almost entirely deficit view of Indigenous children and families. Secondly, and subsequently, it reaffirms the historical power relations that have dogged Indigenous people in the NT since first contact. Thirdly, it fails to offer an approach that can successfully respond to the local, relational, cultural and linguistic complexity of Indigenous education. As an exemplar of the standards-based reform movement in education, *A Share in the*

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Future is likely to work against the student and teacher engagement so necessary to educational success, leading rather to the broad-scale reductions in staff morale and student attendance that have resulted elsewhere from such approaches (Robinson, 2015). It ignores the substantial body of research supporting the critical relational work of teachers with Indigenous children (see Bishop, 2012; Bishop, Ladwig, & Berryman, 2014; Sarra, 2011; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 1996; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014), and will exacerbate the lack of trust, equality and genuine collaboration perceived by many Indigenous people in the NT through their day-to-day experience of government and practices of education (Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, 2010; Scrymgour, 2007; Trudgen, 2008). Further, by locating 'the problem' with Indigenous children and families, critical focus is drawn away from the ideologies, policies and practices of the education agency. This despite, in the NT Department of Education's case, a relatively recent review highlighting a broad array of complex, internal challenges that seriously compromise the effectiveness of the organization (Ladwig and Sarra, 2009).

By undertaking this exposition, this paper will juxtapose the assumptions, propositions and approach of *A Share in the Future* with those of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project (CCCP) undertaken in the NT in 2008. The CCCP represented a unique and innovative, longitudinal investigation of the experiences and learnings of a selected group of 'successful' Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators through their attempts to facilitate enhancements in culturally competent collaboration in a variety of Indigenous education settings in the NT. The CCCP took a strengths-based approach to the complex circumstances and challenges of Indigenous education in the NT, honouring the knowledge and perspectives of all participants through the employment of Indigenous conversational processes such as *Engoori* (Gorringer and Spillman, 2008; Gorringer, 2012).

I spent most of the decade from 1995 onwards working in remote Indigenous education in Central Australia, in teaching and leadership positions. This work culminated in an executive position within a large Indigenous group school, where my primary focus was on community governance of schooling (see Spillman and Costanzo, 2004a; 2004b). This work contributed significantly to being contracted in 2008 to co-design and co-facilitate the CCCP. In 2005, due to family commitments I returned to the east coast of Australia. Since that time I have worked in Indigenous education leadership, Indigenous governance and cultural capability, including eight years facilitating the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program. Over this time I have also spent significant amounts of time learning on country in New South Wales with senior Aboriginal men. I am currently teaching 'learning on country' programs at Maroon Outdoor Education Centre.

A Brief Review of Literature: Discourse and Power in Indigenous Education

Vass (2013) has proposed that, in Australia, the phrase 'Indigenous education' works to invoke widespread deficit assumptions about the educational engagement and outcomes of Indigenous children, among policy makers, educators and the broader community. Beginning from the premise that policy 'problems' arise through the socially constructed processes and contexts of policy making, Vass (2013) 'excavates' and exposes ways by which 'Indigenous education' has come to operate as a 'regime of truth' in a Foucauldian sense, reifying these deficit assumptions and ascribing power. Vass (2013) and others (Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorringer, & Fogarty, 2013; Fogarty, Lovell, & Dodson, 2015) have traced the long history in Australia, regarding the establishment of a deficit discourse both in Indigenous affairs policy in general and Indigenous education in particular. These deficit perspectives were initiated and perpetuated in Australia's early colonial history through a focus on assumptions of biological difference inherent in the application of social Darwinism (Fogarty et al., 2015). Vass (2013, p. 88) identifies a shift in the 1960s towards cultural assumptions regarding Indigenous children's achievement and ability in schooling, marking from that time onwards the association between 'Indigenous' and educational deficit.

In the past few decades, this focus on Indigenous deficit within educational settings has 'permeated policy settings' in Australian education (Fogarty et al., 2015). Supported by evidence from statistical comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' educational participation and achievement, this deficit perspective works to reinforce representations of Indigenous children as deficient, dysfunctional, disempowered and disadvantaged (Fforde et al., 2013; Fogarty et al., 2015; Guenther, Bat, & Osborne, 2013). Indeed it could be argued that the language of 'Indigenous disadvantage' has become synonymous with 'Indigenous education'. Guenther et al. (2013) demonstrate a tight coupling between the two. They propose that while in one sense these statistical data that demonstrate the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on a variety of educational indicators are useful and cannot be denied, in other ways they are problematic.

Focusing on remote Indigenous education contexts, and drawing from other Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, Guenther et al. (2013, p. 101) outline a number of problems with the language and representation of Indigenous educational 'disadvantage'. Firstly, an exclusive focus or over-reliance on such statistical data creates a narrative that reinforces the notion that being Indigenous 'is' the disadvantage, a cultural or 'racial' endowment. Extending on this, the notion of 'exceptionalism' of Indigenous people on the basis of 'race' may be

perceived and reinforced. This narrative of cultural or racial endowment works to homogenize Indigenous identities and reinforces over-simplistic, 'false binaries along racial lines' — Indigenous / non-Indigenous (Guenther et al., 2013, p. 102). Secondly, the assumptions about, and definitions of 'advantage' and 'disadvantage' on which the discourse is based, are western, thus potentially prioritizing the 'interests of the privileged, reinforcing a hegemony that in turn reinforces existing power dynamics in society' (Guenther et al., 2013, p. 102).

It is in such a way that Vass (2013, p. 86) highlights the coupling of discourse and power, where discourse works to organize and regulate power relations. He writes:

'Indigenous education' can be viewed as a 'regime of truth' that is girded by deficit assumptions, drawing attention to ongoing concerns with perspective, position and power within the broader Australian landscape.

Fogarty et al. (2015) have suggested that in Australia, the coalescence of the ideology and practices of the global standardization reform movement in education, along with this deficit focus in Indigenous education, is serving to accentuate both this discourse of deficit and disadvantage, and the power relating it promulgates. Here, the discourse of disadvantage dictates that 'policy success is defined primarily in terms of statistical parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people' (Fogarty et al., 2015, p. 5). In such a context there is no scope to include Indigenous expectations, perspectives or aspirations (Fogarty et al., 2015). Nor is there any space to interrogate the possibility of flaws in the education system (Guenther et al., 2013), or that notions of 'success' might differ for Indigenous people and in different localities and contexts (Osborne and Guenther, 2013a). Rather, as Osborne and Guenther (2013a, p. 91) point out through their research, decisions regarding educational outcomes and approaches for Indigenous children, and subsequently the teaching and learning approaches enacted in remote classrooms remain grounded in the epistemological and ontological assumptions of neoliberal aspiration, 'property, authority and (individual) achievement'. Further, decisions about educational outcomes and approaches for Indigenous students remain with educational experts and bureaucrats at distance from the local contexts of Indigenous education (Osborne & Guenther, 2013a).

Standardised, high-stakes, national testing has become a 'metapolicy' for education systems around the world, driven by the competitive lure of a global educational marketplace and the neoliberal promise of raised standards and economies (Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). Lingard et al. (2013, p. 543) offer the term *global panopticism* to describe this phenomenon where the 'global eye' of educational surveillance regulates and influences national education policy 'to facilitate a form of neoliberal governance in terms of the ranking and marketing of education systems'. In this way national testing regimes constitute

apparatus for top-down 'infrastructures of accountability' that impact directly on goals of schooling, curriculum and pedagogy, where school and teacher performance is now directed from afar (Lingard et al., 2013). This new mode of governance at a distance is diminishing accountabilities between schools and their communities (Sellar, 2013), and removing accountability for education from informed professional judgments by teachers (Lingard et al., 2013). This is the era of 'policy as numbers' (Lingard, 2011) and 'big data' marked by an 'epistemological shift from concerns with causality and understanding to concerns with correlation and predictability' (Lingard et al., 2013, p. 542). Robinson (2015) reports broad-scale reductions in staff morale and student attendance and engagement as a result of the standardization reform agenda in the USA and other countries. Concerns about the diminishment of both public discourse regarding education, and the rigor of educational research have also been raised (Reid, 2013).

In Australia, one 'vernacular version of (this) global policy discourse' (Lingard et al., 2013, p. 541) has manifest in the form of the 'National Assessment Program — Literacy And Numeracy' (NAPLAN). NAPLAN is a set of standardized, national literacy and numeracy tests administered once a year for all year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students in the country. It has been implemented in the NT since 2008, though various other forms of standardized testing were utilized in education jurisdictions including the NT for several years prior to this (Guenther, 2013). Guenther (2013, p. 157) points out that NAPLAN operates as a whole-of-school accountability mechanism, where it is used to determine school funding, reflect curriculum, informs pedagogy, provides teachers with evidence of student learning and has even been 'touted as an instrument that will help assess teacher quality'. Yet this nearly decade old approach is having little impact. The Productivity Commission's 2013–14 performance assessment reports:

it is clear that between 2008 and 2014 there was little overall progress made in reducing the sizeable disparities in the proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students meeting minimum reading and numeracy standards (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 9)

There may be several reasons for this disappointing result. NAPLAN has been exposed as 'linguistically and culturally problematic for Indigenous children, especially those in remote areas' (Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Loakes, 2011, p. 340), and for those for whom English is a second or additional language (Australian College of Educators, 2010). For Guenther et al. (2013) one of the problems with this standardisation approach is that the underlying discourse of disadvantage, with its focus on the 'gap of disparity' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, keeps the 'problem' located with Indigenous people. As

previously outlined, in such a context there is little appetite for what Indigenous people bring with them to the educational encounter. This view leads to over-simplistic binaries of Indigenous and non-Indigenous student identities, separated by this gap of disparity, which in turn leads to over-simplistic, one-size-fits-all approaches. In addition, Indigenous people's expectations and aspirations regarding schooling may vary substantially from the assumptions about 'success' inherent in the standardization discourse (Osborne and Guenther, 2013a). In real and significant ways the standardization discourse and approach to education implemented in Australian schools over the past decade, assigns Indigenous children and families to a never-ending game of 'catch-up' with little regard for their strengths, perspectives and aspirations. In doing so it replicates the unequal power relations of the colonial agenda.

In response to this critique and challenge, Osborne and Guenther (2013a) identify the need to 'interrupt established ways of thinking' about discourse, power and pedagogy. This requires educators to engage in rigorous critical reflection regarding their cultural and professional selves, in particular the assumptions about educational success, pedagogy and curriculum, which they carry with them and enact. Osborne and Guenther (2013a) and others (Bat & Guenther, 2013; Brasche & Harrington, 2012; Fogarty et al., 2015; Manhood, 2012) highlight the critical importance of considering the cultural, linguistic and social complexity that manifests in locally nuanced ways in remote Indigenous schooling and life. In such contexts, 'success' may take a more relational and place-based flavour than is assumed in the neoliberal discourse. Here Indigenous perspectives and standpoints need be prioritized. Yet as Osborne and Guenther (2013b, p. 113) point out, 'the privileging of Indigenous knowledge in formal school settings will always be a joint, developmental process.' It requires a conversation, a dialogue not a monologue, within a relational space of trust (Osborne & Guenther, 2013b).

Chris Sarra, the Indigenous principal who led the cultural shift towards 'high-expectations' at Cherbourg School brings such important sociopolitical and relational questions home to teachers when he asks questions like: 'How often do you engage in deficit thinking and talking about Indigenous children and families?' 'Do you see the strengths and potential that already reside in each Indigenous child?' How much do you know about the life and circumstances of each child and his / her family, so you can respond to the unique context of each learner?' 'How are you affirming the cultural identities of Indigenous children and families in your class and school?' (Sarra, 2012). The Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI), established by Sarra in 2009, recently released a position paper on 'High-expectations relationships' (SSI, 2014). Clearly this positions the notion of 'high-expectations' as a relational as well as a performance agenda. In a similar way

to Osborne and Guenther's (2013b) call for robust local dialogue within relationships of trust, high-expectations relationship are composed of two elements, socially just relating (to establish relational trust, care and safety) and critically reflective relating (to challenge assumptions, perspectives and practices).

The Wilson Review

On 7 February 2014, the draft report of *A Share in the Future* was launched (Wilson, 2014). After a round of public consultation meetings and 118 submissions in response the final report was submitted to the NT government on 8 April 2014. This final report included an additional 14 recommendations (37 in the draft to 51 in final report). The majority of these additional recommendations addressed key areas of Indigenous education in the NT, areas that had been overlooked in the review process. Education minister, the honourable Peter Chandler flagged these key additional areas in his media release on 14 May 2014 (Chandler, 2014), including:

A bigger focus on community engagement with schools [and]
Greater clarity around the role of first language in schooling

Due to the changes and additions subsequent to feedback on the draft, it seems clear that the draft review was heavily criticized for failing to consider these key issues. Buried further in the report we find an acknowledgment of the breadth and extent of these concerns.

Many respondents stated strongly held views of bilingual education . . . There was also extensive commentary on the role of first language in education, the place of Indigenous culture in schools, aspects of community engagement (Wilson, 2014, p. 34)

While there is an acknowledgment of the value of first-language literacy and cultural teaching added to the final review (bottom paragraph p. 11), and some significant concessions in this regard (Recommendation 20 p. 20) the overall sentiment remains ambivalent, partial and understated regarding these key areas. For example regarding Primary education text added to the final review includes:

The review supports the teaching of literacy in first language where feasible . . . Indigenous culture should be taught where communities support this (Wilson, 2014, p. 20)

These concessions appear tokenistic at worst, and instrumental at best, as the educational goals of *A Share in the Future* remain clearly and exclusively on English literacy and numeracy.

Further on we read that during the consultation phase there were:

Some concerns that the picture painted of the lives of Indigenous people was excessively negative (Wilson, 2014, p. 37)

Despite this acknowledgment, representations of Indigenous children and families remained entirely deficit in the final report. The review 'terms of reference' required the reviewer to 'map and analyse the (Indigenous education) context, including the characteristics of the Indigenous student population' (Wilson, 2014, p. 31). While there is a variety of quantitative and qualitative ways to do this that could provide layering, richness and context, only the statistical parameters of NAPLAN, student attendance and other demographic data (e.g. access to the internet, median incomes etc.) were used. Collectively these statistics work to construct a strongly deficit view of 'the characteristics of the Indigenous student population' in the NT and their families. Fogarty et al. (2015, pp. 11–12) provide a succinct summary of the deficit ways Indigenous families and communities are depicted in Wilson's review.

The use of comparative statistics in this way to map Indigenous educational deficit remains central to the review process, perpetuating the coupling of 'Indigenous disadvantage' with 'Indigenous education'. As NAPLAN is the primary statistical tool employed for the review analysis, English literacy and numeracy are placed exclusively as the indicators of educational 'success' for Indigenous children. Wilson (2014, p. 35) outlines:

It is also important to acknowledge from the outset that this review has made a pragmatic decision to focus on the skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system.

In so doing the review ignored research emerging at the time from the Remote Education Systems project undertaken by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation in Alice Springs. Here, Osborne and Guenther (2013a) argue that Indigenous people living in remote contexts hold and expect a more expansive view of educational success, one that includes both these western indicators of educational success and locally identified, place-based, cultural and relational aspirations. In *A Share in the Future* such local Indigenous perspectives are discounted (Fogarty et al., 2015). This is clearly problematic and seriously limits the usefulness of the report, especially when considering that 75% of Indigenous people in NT live in such remote settings (Fogarty et al., 2015).

Overall, the review fails completely to engage Indigenous people in the NT regarding their educational aspirations, expectations and perspectives, ignoring the substantial body of research and theory supporting the importance of Indigenous perspectives and standpoints within the field of Indigenous education (see Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Arbon, 2008; Fogarty and Schwab, 2012; Ford, 2010; Nakata, 2007; Osborne and Guenther, 2013b; Sveiby & Scuthorpe, 2006; Vass, 2013). Despite being required to 'advise on partnerships including both the empowerment of local communities and improvement of collaboration with other agencies and the Australian government' (Wilson, 2014, p. 20), little proactive attempt was made to seek

a variety of Indigenous perspectives. An online community survey appears to be the only opportunity offered for Indigenous people to express a view. Yet only 16 % of the 400 respondents were Indigenous with 74% of those being teachers and an additional 12% being nonteaching education workers. In their critique, Fogarty et al. (2015, p. 13) argue that the review positions community engagement instrumentally, that is primarily in terms of its capacity 'for persuading adult community members to support predefined government goals for local schools and students'.

This, almost exclusive, focus in the review on the literacy and numeracy 'gap of disparity' enables the reduction of Indigenous education to a set of technical and bureaucratic practices. This position is most clearly demonstrated in the argument and proposed recommendations regarding education in Priority 1 schools. These are schools demonstrating the 'greatest disadvantage' across a number of statistical scales including, remoteness, Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage, enrolment, attendance and NAPLAN data, proportion from non-English speaking backgrounds and the Australian Early Developmental Index (Wilson, 2014, p. 15). While there are three groups of schools based on this classificatory method, Priority 1 schools have the greatest 'educational need' (Wilson, 2014, p. 49). They include the vast majority of very remote schools (73 out of 80) and six remote schools (p. 50). The review proposes that this categorization should dictate not only the resourcing for schools but also the kind of 'evidence-based approaches that are known to work with students experiencing specific forms of disadvantage' (p. 59). Citing only one piece of research here (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010), Wilson proposes that Priority 1 schools (low performing) will do best when 'they tighten control and provide technical training' (Wilson, 2014, p. 59). This equates to a reduction in the professional autonomy of Priority 1 schools, zero negotiation with the school community about purpose and process, and a consistent one-size-fits all instructional curriculum and pedagogy.

This argument is clearly problematic. It is based on a premise that the educational needs of children in the 79 Priority 1 schools are broadly and consistently the same. While there may be some common need for groups of students across schools that inform a generic educational approach in some contexts, the proposition here is that this statistical knowledge is entirely adequate in determining the educational approaches required by all students in these 79 Priority 1 schools. This position stands in stark contrast to the findings of a number of well-known Indigenous education researchers and organizations (Bishop, 2012; Bishop et al., 2014; Sarra, 2011; Shields et al., 1996; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). All focus substantially on the critical relational work of teachers with students, enabling them to understand and respond appropriately to the unique individual, social, economic, cultural and linguistic circumstances of each learner (Bishop et al.,

2014; Sarra, 2011). This is the basis, for example, of the Stronger Smarter Institute's notion of *high-expectations relationships* central to educational success for Indigenous children (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014).

It is disconcerting to note that *A Share in the Future*, a critically important educational document that is currently impacting heavily on the lives of many Indigenous children in the NT, is entirely devoid of the words 'relationships', 'relational' or 'relating' in reference to human interaction. This is an important point of critique, as it is the absence of these words that flags the complete lack of acknowledgment of the locally nuanced complexity of Indigenous education settings. There is no discussion in *A Share in the Future* of the kind of relational and circumstantial complexity inherent in day-to-day lives of educators, children and families working and living in remote Indigenous settings, as outlined and discussed by several researchers and practitioners (see Brasche and Harrington, 2012; Manhood, 2012; Osborne and Guenther, 2013a; Osborne and Guenther, 2013b). Acknowledging this local, relational complexity would uncouple what Lingard et al. (2013, p. 542) identify as the 'statistics / state relationship', a primary tool of educational governance, and central to the ideological basis of the review. Rather, in *A Share in the Future*, Wilson conflates the degree of social, cultural, linguistic and economic complexity of a school community with its degree of 'disadvantage', in order to justify an over-simplistic, whole-of-system, instructional approach, enabling surveillance and governance of schools from a distance. Further, by placing complete authority to determine educational goals and approaches with western educational 'experts' and bureaucrats far removed from the local Indigenous education interface, *A Share in the Future* reinforces and exacerbates the unequal power relations typical of colonialism.

The Cross-Cultural Collaboration Project

This section of the paper examines aspects of a professional learning project, also undertaken in the NT, which was designed to avoid and/or disrupt the assumptions and practices of deficit discourse and colonial power relations. The following exposition focuses on two key elements of this project, strengths-based approaches and conversational circles.

Three months prior to the commencement of Wilson's review in 2013, an Interim Report of research findings from the CCCP was passed to the Chief Executive of NT Department of Education and Training (Spillman, 2013). The CCCP was initiated and undertaken in 2008 largely in response to key challenges identified in 2006 by the NT Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET), Indigenous Leaders Network. I was contracted by the education agency to co-design and co-facilitate both the Indigenous Leaders Network and the CCCP. The Indigenous Leaders Network, involving 35 Indige-

nous education leaders from across the NT, identified three critical organizational challenges for NT DEET.

1. Enhancing levels of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of school communities
2. Enhancing the bicultural competence among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous education employees and
3. Enhancing genuinely collaborative decision-making at all levels of the agency (Spillman, 2006).

In 2008, the CCCP aimed to:

Significantly enhance levels of culturally competent collaboration within DEET workplaces to improve student outcomes and service delivery (NT DEET, 2007)

Thus in the conception and design of CCCP it was accepted that central to 'culturally competent collaboration' are relationships of trust, bicultural competence and collaborative decision-making between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of school communities. In this way, and as advocated by Osborne and Guenther (2013a), the processes adopted in CCCP recognized the complex relational work of educators, the critical importance of local Indigenous perspectives, and the need for rigorous 'situated dialogue' and reflection.

The CCCP represented an in-depth interrogation of the day-to-day experiences and practices of Indigenous education in the NT, through the eyes of long-term, 'successful' Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. The professional learning process employed, drew on the experiences and capabilities of participants to identify, create and trial efficacious approaches to culturally competent collaboration. Eleven pairs of Indigenous / non-Indigenous educators were invited to participate, having been selected by a group of peers and managers, based on their history of success as classroom practitioners including in bilingual education, in establishing strong connections and partnerships with families and community members and/or in leading successful programs or innovations within schools. Participants came to CCCP as an Indigenous / non-Indigenous relational-pair with a strong existing working relationship. They shared nine days of reflective conversation and practice, split into three forums (four days, three days, two days) over a six-month period. Between forums, participant pairs planned and facilitated conversational processes with staff at their schools, to enhance culturally competent collaboration in order to begin addressing complex challenges they faced. These workplace projects became important sites for learning and change. The CCCP culminated in the co-creation of a professional learning approach for government employees working in Indigenous education in the NT — the *Cultures of Collaboration Program*.

Thirty-six hours of video footage of CCCP conversations, presentation and interviews were thematically

analysed for dominant patterns of talking and thinking among participants. Of particular focus were conversational episodes and patterns of:

1. deficit and strengths-based talking and theorizing
2. homogenisation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities, and the over-simplistic binaries and approaches they perpetuate, and
3. assumptions and thinking that reflected perceptions of power relations.

The key learnings from that intensive research, outlined in the Interim Report, provide evidence and perspective for an approach to Indigenous education in the NT that differs significantly to the one proposed in *A Share in the Future*. All necessary ethics approvals and permissions were obtained from the relevant organizations and individuals for this CCCP research to be undertaken and published.

Strengths-Based Approaches

Fogarty et al. (2015) acknowledge the value and importance of educational approaches focused on strengths-based discourse. Such approaches are not new to Indigenous education in the NT, despite being conspicuously absent in *A Share in the Future*. In the 36 hours of video footage of interviews, conversations and presentations thematically analysed from the CCCP, there was not one incident of the deficit theorizing about Indigenous students and families, so central to *A Share in the Future*. This is not surprising as the 22 Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants were selected as a result of their success and leadership in Indigenous education.

The CCCP began on day one by asking participants to share their stories, experiences and strengths in a variety of ways. *Engoori* was one of the strengths-based processes employed for this work (Gorringe, 2012). *Engoori* is a three-phase conversational process from the Tjimpamithaka people of south-west Queensland that builds on individual and collective strengths before considering critical challenges. It is a contemporary interpretation of an old Mithaka story about a conflict resolution ceremony. The first phase of *Engoori* asks participants to reflect on, respond to and talk about the questions, ‘What keeps me/us strong?’ Individual narratives of strength are consensually mapped into collective narratives of strength. One of the dominant themes emerging from this work with the CCCP group is identified in the following conversation.

It wasn't possible for me to think about me, without family. (Indigenous male)

Yeah me too. I couldn't think of myself separate from my family, even before I was married. (non-Indigenous male)

Yeah we all talked about family. Family's at the core. It's the heart. It's what keeps all of us strong. (Indigenous male)

Several Indigenous participants began referring to the CCCP participants as family.

I feel safe too . . . going back to my school and staff is a little bit difficult, . . . and I always think of this [group] as part of my family. (Indigenous female)

It was noted in the ensuing conversations that many teachers get ‘taken into’ or ‘adopted by’ family when beginning to work on remote communities. This was unanimously seen as important and powerful relational phenomena. Three Indigenous female participants also talked about how they relate to the children in their class as their children too.

I am their teacher . . . um . . . responsible for their learning and wellbeing. I also love and care for them as their mother . . . I keep a mother eye open as well as a teacher eye . . . all the time.

Though other strengths were highlighted and discussed, most participants agreed that enacting ‘family’ in teacher–student, and collegial relationships was critically important. Such a position coincides with Folds (2001) perspective that for Pintupi maintaining good family (*walytja*) relationships is the heart of Pintupi life and culture. Osborne (2015) exposes, through interviews, with Indigenous educators and family members, how ‘family’ is perceived as providing the foundation for Indigenous children’s success, thus challenging the assumption of ‘family’ as ‘disadvantage’ so central to the perspective offered in *A Share in the Future*. Bishop et al. (2014) outline research over many years that clearly demonstrates how family-like, student–teacher relationships are essential to Indigenous students’ educational engagement and performance.

Beginning with strength-based conversations that honour the diversity and uniqueness of experiences, stories, strengths and aspirations that children and family members bring with them, is much more likely to inspire motivation to participate and learn. They also enable the creation of supportive, inclusive learning environments necessary to nurture and translate that motivation into self-efficacy and resilience with learning. While public and political dialogue regarding Indigenous education remains largely devoid of such strengths-based conversations (Osborne and Guenther, 2013b), some such alternative approaches and discourses are beginning to emerge (Fogarty et al., 2015; Gorringe and Spillman, 2008; Guenther et al., 2013; Sarra, 2011). Engaging in such conversations both requires and reinforces power relations different to those enacted and perpetuated through the kind of deficit discourse manifest in *A Share in the Future*.

Conversational Circles

In considering why much needed school transformation often fails, education researcher Julia Aitken (1996, p. 5) proposes:

The challenge for those directing, the central authority, is to change the focus from dictating from the top to coordinating and supporting from the center.

To unpack this Aitken offers the visual metaphor of a triangle and a circle. Here the former represents an approach of 'direct, command and control' and the latter, framing, coordinating and supporting 'from the centre'. Contemplating an education system as a triangle makes obvious the hierarchical nature of assumptions about power, leadership, knowledge and expertise inherent in *A Share in the Future*. All are concentrated at the top of the triangle, diminishing as one moves down. This justifies an exclusive focus on the 'technical, financial, legal, structural, governance and staffing' issues, things that are 'known' and controllable from the top (Wilson, 2014, p. 17). Considering a circle as the metaphorical focus shifts the role of the 'central authority' to framing policy, seeking and coordinating localized interpretations and responses from school communities, and then supporting them to realize their subsequent, negotiated visions. There is a necessary relational dynamic and reciprocity in this kind of approach, one that requires a dialogue 'not a monologue' (Osborne and Guenther, 2013b, p.94). It flags an important shift in underlying assumptions about knowledge, power and leadership, to a more shared perspective, one that honours the knowledge, capabilities and aspiration of 'local' people. It enables the enactment of 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' approaches, as advocated by Sarra (2015). Here school communities are encouraged and able to consider their unique sociopolitical, cultural, relational and pedagogic circumstances when negotiating school purposes and approaches.

Conversational circles represented a key interactive process utilized in CCCP. They are based on the belief that as human beings we all wish to connect to self and others in good ways (Prannis, 2005). They are an attempt to enact *equal power relating* where the experiences, knowledge, ideas and aspirations of all in the circle are ideally accepted as equally valid, and seriously considered. Conversational circles offer an effective site and process for the establishment of the kind of educational dialogue (Osborne and Guenther, 2013a) and relational trust (Osborne and Guenther, 2013b) identified as essential to successful approaches in remote Indigenous education contexts. In CCCP the practices of the circle enabled group members over time, to establish a space of safety and trust.

The circle is a physical manifestation of safety. Early in our time we kept the circle tight. Now we can sit anywhere because of the trust (Indigenous female)

Engaging in the conversational practices of the circle highlighted and affirmed the dynamic relational nature of intercultural work.

CCCP has clarified that a lot of crosscultural collaboration is about forming a strong relationship with that person you're working with or that group of people you're working with. (non-Indigenous female)

The critical importance of equal power relating to learning and transformation in Indigenous education contexts has been recently identified and examined by the Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI) in their position paper on *high expectations relationships* (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). Equal power relating, referred to, as *socially just relating* in their paper, is the first essential element of a high-expectations relationship. Equal power relating constituted one of the primary purposes of the conversational circles employed during CCCP, in order to enhance experiences and perceptions of trust, care and safety among participants. This then enabled conversations to become more edgy, robust, and high-stakes, while minimising the likelihood of conflict and defensiveness. The potential for individual and group transformation began to increase.

The power and success of CCCP has been through the group dynamic that has developed. There's been a lot of high-stakes disclosure, and people getting deeply into themselves to bring our attributes that can seed change. (Indigenous male)

Importantly in this way, the sense of trust and safety established through using conversational circles to enable equal power relating, then enabled *critically reflective relating*, the second component of a high-expectations relationship (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). The necessity of enhancing the quality of equal power relating prior to entering robust challenging conversations was grasped by at least one participant.

I would say that what I learnt from the last workshop was the absolute importance of ... um establishing that circle of trust, before you go into any of these ... brackish water (muddied, turbulent, complex) situations. (Indigenous male)

Critically reflective relating necessarily requires the platform of relational trust and safety established through equal power relating. Critically reflective relating is often initiated through giving and receiving critical feedback, or other experiences that challenge habits of thinking and doing.

For example, one participant pair used Engoori to enact critically reflective relating in their workplace project. Initially they asked their colleagues to have a conversation about the learning of Indigenous students at the school. Without commenting they noticed the conversation quickly turned to a deficit perspective where it remained. They then introduced Engoori, engaging participants in strength-based conversation about themselves. They noted the levity, engagement and emotionality of these conversations. Once completed, they asked the group to reflect on the two conversations. The pair reported that the differences were easily identified and acknowledged. They then led a conversation about the impacts of deficit and strengths-based approaches in Indigenous education. This simple conversational process engaged workplace colleagues in critical reflection regarding their own conver-

sational habits and assumptions. This is an example of the kind of ‘reframing (of) the dialogue’ advocated by Osborne and Guenther (2013b, p. 115), that can work to challenge both (deficit) assumptions and power relations. Here, for this group of teachers the possibility was created for substantial transformation in their relationships with Indigenous students and families.

In such ways, critically reflective relating is essential to challenge limiting assumptions and mindsets such as those of deficit discourse. Over time, it builds the individual and collective, social and emotional resilience and robustness, necessary for success in the complex contexts of Indigenous education (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). Critically reflective relating is self-reflexive practice, the essential ‘tool’ for creating success in complex organizational circumstances (Stacey, 2011).

The most significant change for me through CCCP is that I now challenge my own assumptions, challenging my reactions to certain situations. This allows me to choose different responses and decisions Through the CCCP projects things have come into my consciousness. It’s allowed me to be a more relaxed leader. I can only ever change myself not others. I can now be the change I want to see. (Indigenous female)

For their workplace project, one CCCP pair chose to focus on enhancing the engagement of Aboriginal assistant teachers in teaching and learning conversations. After two, two-hour sessions with school staff they reported:

We’ve found a natural transition now in our weekly staff gatherings. We begin with a check-in. This gets us out-of-role and leads to another circle activity to connect us at a personal level. This leads us to our planning which takes us into the professional level, but it happens really fast because we’ve already got the vocab for communicating. . . . Classroom teachers are saying they see a whole new world in their assistant teachers (local Aboriginal people - ATs) now as a result of this work. Their ATs are feeling more confident. They’re suggesting things like check-ins and check-outs and are really feeling part of our teaching and primary teams. (non-Indigenous female)

The check-in and circle activity at a ‘personal level’ constituted an activity to promote equal power relating. It worked to enhance relational trust and safety. This then enabled the possibility of critically reflective relating at a ‘professional level’. Here in a short period of time, by using the circle to focus on the two components of high expectations relationships, perceptions of power and engagement shifted positively, beginning to enhance the productivity of their conversations. With such conversational practices maintained over time, the quality and robustness of critically reflective conversations could increase. It is precisely these individual and collective relational capabilities for creating trust, robust challenging conversations, and critical self-reflection that are required to co-create success in the complex contextual and relational dynamics of Indige-

nous education in the NT. As highlighted by Bat and Guenther (2013), such approaches recognise and honour the centrality of locally contextual relationships and dialogue, to engage local families in negotiating schooling purpose and processes in remote Indigenous education settings.

Conclusion

In this paper the latest review of Indigenous education in the NT, *A Share in the Future*, has been critiqued and exposed as a textbook example of the global, neoliberal standardization reform movement, within Indigenous education in Australia. Here the exclusive portrayal of ‘Indigenous’ as ‘deficit’ and ‘disadvantaged’, the unequal power relations these constructions reify, and the subsequently justified one-size-fits-all, technical, schooling approaches, administered and monitored with governance, surveillance and accountability from afar and above, have been juxtaposed with the approach undertaken in the CCCP. Clearly, the conversational processes advocated in this paper through the brief exposition of the CCCP cannot overturn the unequal power relations, deeply and historically embedded in the ideologies, structures, policies and practices of the education agency. However, as many of the CCCP participants understood, these conversational processes can work to begin shifting the local politic. Practices such as conversational circles and strengths-based conversations, enable locally negotiated knowledge of who students are, how they best learn and the purposes and processes of schooling. In such local contexts, a more humanizing, sophisticated, nuanced and engaging evidence-based approach to student wellbeing, learning and achievement can be co-created and implemented.

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