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Community involvement in education: an exploration of American Indian education policy and implications for Australia

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Professor Jon Altman
Director, CAEPR
The Australian National University
October 1996

ABSTRACT

Indigenous education policy has long emphasised the need to increase the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members in local education. Yet attempts to increase involvement invariably raise important questions about the nature of the traditional Western educational model and its relevance to Indigenous communities. This paper represents an effort to contribute to the ongoing discussions of how best to increase parent and community involvement while insuring community relevance. While the ultimate focus remains on Indigenous education in Australia, the paper is an exploratory one and draws on the experiences of American Indian communities in the United States that are facing similar educational issues. The paper provides an historical overview of Indian education policy, a brief case study of an Indian school, and details two promising approaches to building parental and community involvement in Indian schools that could be adapted to the Australian context.

Acknowledgments

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Foreword

This discussion paper by Dr Jerry Schwab focuses on one of the most important yet difficult issues in contemporary Indigenous education: increasing parental and community involvement in education. Involvement of Indigenous parents has long been identified as one of the keys to boosting educational participation and performance, increasing retention rates and, ultimately, for increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians. Yet building links between Indigenous parents and communities and local schools has remained problematic.

While in the United States giving a paper on Indigenous Australian education issues, Jerry Schwab took the opportunity to visit two American Indian communities and meet with Indian educators and other individuals involved with designing and implementing Indigenous educational programs and policy at both Federal and State levels. As in Australian, prominent among the critical issues for American Indian communities was the educational performance of Indigenous children. During those meetings he focused his attention on strategies and approaches being implemented in American Indian communities in attempts to involve Indigenous American parents and communities with their children's education.

Though it draws on United States experience, this discussion paper is not strictly comparative in the sense that the various features of American and Australian Indigenous education status are exhaustively compared item by item; such an approach might be a useful exercise but is not the aim here. Rather, the paper's aim is to depict the historical and political context of contemporary American Indian education and to examine approaches to educational reform and community involvement that are currently being implemented in American Indian communities and schools. Educational policy makers in Australia should find these experiments of great interest in their efforts to increase community involvement in education in Indigenous communities here. But it should also be noted that not all of these American initiatives have, as yet, been rigorously evaluated and any temptation to replicate these initiatives uncritically should be avoided.

Professor Jon Altman
Series Editor
October 1996

The relative disadvantage of Indigenous Australians is evident on every significant educational outcome indicator.[1] Literacy and numeracy levels are consistently depressed, participation and retention rates low, and levels of qualification are far below those of other Australians. The costs of this disadvantage, in economic and social terms, are sizeable, yet raising educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians to the level of the general population remains one of the country's most intractable social problems.

For over 25 years, a variety of policy pathways for addressing educational disadvantage in Australia have been explored at the national level (Schwab 1995), and a range of practical programs and approaches have been implemented. Across the country, remedial efforts have been redoubled, the number of Indigenous school staff increased, special funding policies implemented, Indigenous language programs introduced, and curricula redesigned. Significant progress has been made, yet Indigenous student participation and retention rates continue to fall at a rapid rate during the secondary years, and social outcomes, in terms of employment and income, decline accordingly. If anything is clear after 25 years of policy and program efforts, it is that increased educational participation and retention rates are crucial factors in efforts to raise employment and income for Indigenous Australians. One of the critical problems of the day is how to engage Indigenous children with education. Yet, the answer is increasingly seen as one that requires not just looking for ways to engage the students, but to involve and engage the parents and the larger community.

Some recognition of this need is evident in the Commonwealth's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) where the first of the 21 long-term goals of the policy is 'to establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of preschool, primary and secondary education services for their children' (Commonwealth of Australia 1993: 12). This goal emerges from both research data and common sense experiences showing that various forms of parental commitment to education correlate with increases in retention and performance.

The commitment of parents and communities to education and involvement in decisions regarding the education of their children is only one of a cluster of other related and thorny questions about the content of educational experiences for Indigenous students.[2] For example, what is education for? How does education fit with the needs of particular communities? To what degree should communities influence curriculum content? Who should decide what sorts of education are 'appropriate' for a specific community?

These questions are of critical importance in defining and achieving improved educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Though they are not new questions, satisfactory answers continue to be illusive. In an attempt to gain a different perspective, this paper undertakes an exploration of these questions in a distant yet related context and examines issues surrounding community involvement in education among American Indians and Native Alaskans.[3] As a means to set the stage for later discussion, the paper begins with a brief description of the demographic status of American Indians and includes a few sample comparisons of Indian and Australian educational indicators. Next, the paper provides a sketch of the historical and legal development of contemporary Indian education policy. The histories of interaction between Indian tribes and the Federal and State Governments (especially as mediated through treaties) contrast sharply with the histories of relations between Australian Governments and Indigenous Australians; to understand Indigenous education policy in America, it is necessary to understand the particular historical context out of which it emerged. The paper then presents a short case study of an Indian school, illustrating some of the current challenges in Indian education. The paper concludes with discussion of two examples of contemporary approaches to community involvement in education in Indian communities and a consideration of their relevance to the Australian context.

An overview of Indigenous American education status

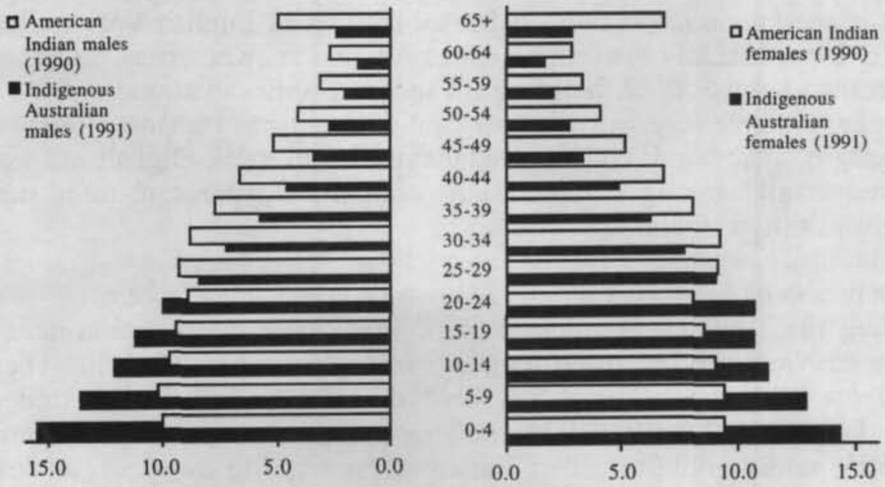
There were over 1.9 million American Indians in the United States in 1990 (Appendix Table A.1), representing over 300 Indian tribes and over 200 Alaskan Native communities (United States Department of Education, Indian Nations at Risk Task Force 1991). Together, these groups comprise about 0.7 per cent of the total United States population. In comparison, there were 265,460 Indigenous Australians in Australia in 1991 (Appendix Table A.2), accounting for 1.6 per cent of the total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1993).

Age and sex

Viewed by age and sex, the populations of the Indigenous peoples of the United States and Australia look surprisingly different. Figure 1 portrays the distribution of the Indian peoples in 1990 in terms of age and sex against the same variables for Indigenous Australians in 1991. The pyramid-like shape of the Indigenous Australian population is typical of developing Third World populations and indicates large numbers of young persons and relatively smaller numbers of older persons. The shape is indicative of high fertility and short life spans. In comparison, the American Indian population is somewhat more 'mature' in the sense that the fertility level is lower and the age expectancy higher. For example, while 37.9 per cent of the Indigenous American population was less than

20 years of age in 1990, over 50 per cent of the Indigenous Australian population was under 20 years of age in 1991. Where 5.9 per cent of the Indian population was 65 years of age or older, only 2.6 per cent of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was in this category. Interestingly, the distribution of the Indian population is much closer to the distribution of the non-Indigenous, industrial populations.

Figure 1. Age and sex profile of American Indians (1990) and Indigenous Australians (1991).



Source: ABS (1993); United States Bureau of Census (1995).

Geographic distribution

While 25 per cent of the Indian population lives on reservations and another 9 per cent on trust land areas, over 300,000 (16 per cent) live in urban areas (National Education Association 1991). Though the categories for the United States and Australian censuses are not directly comparable, it is interesting to note that 27.8 per cent of Indigenous Australians reside in capital cities and about 20 per cent live in rural and remote areas (ABS 1993).

Though Indians reside in every one of the 50 American States, there are major concentrations of population in particular States. For example, over half the population in 1990 lived in six States: Oklahoma (252,000), California (242,000), Arizona (204,000), New Mexico (134,000), Alaska (86,000) and Washington (81,000) (Hodgkinson 1992). In the States of Alaska, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona the proportion of Indian residents reaches nearly 9 per cent. In comparison, in 1991 over half of the Indigenous Australian population lived in two of Australia's eight States or Territories: New South Wales (65,133) and Queensland (55,474). The largest proportion of Indigenous citizens in 1991 was in the Northern

Territory where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprised 22.7 per cent of the total population (ABS 1993).

Language

The majority of Indigenous persons in both the United States and Australia speak only English. Of American Indian people five years of age and over in 1990, 77 per cent speak only English (United States Bureau of Census 1995). Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders five years of age and over who speak only English, on the other hand, accounted for 80.3 per cent of the population (ABS 1993). For those individuals in the same samples who indicated they speak languages other than English, 20.1 per cent of the Indian respondents indicated they speak English 'very well' or 'well'. Proportionally fewer Indigenous Australians who speak languages other than English rated their English speaking skills at similar levels (13 per cent). Conversely, only 2.9 per cent of American Indians who speak languages other than English judged themselves to speak English 'not well' or 'not at all'; among Indigenous Australians, 6.5 per cent rated their English skills at similar low levels.

Type of school

During the 1990-91 American school year, there were approximately 445,425 American Indian primary and secondary school students. These students comprise about 1 per cent of total United States student population of 1.7 million. The Indian students were distributed among 79,885 public and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) or tribal schools. Roughly half (254,925 or 56 per cent) of these students attended public schools where less than 25 per cent of the students were of Indian descent; there were 78,625 of these schools. Just over one-third of students (65,161 or 36 per cent) attended one of 1,260 public schools with Indian enrolments accounting for more than 25 per cent of total enrolments. The remaining 35,339 students (8 per cent) attended one of 149 BIA or tribally-controlled schools; in these schools, Indian students comprised 99 per cent of the school populations (United States Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement 1995).

In comparison, there were 72,251 Indigenous Australian primary and secondary students enrolled in Australian schools in 1991. These students comprised about 2.4 per cent of the total Australian school student population of approximately 3.1 million (Australian Education Council 1992). While 8 per cent of Indian students attended BIA or tribally-controlled schools, recent estimates suggest that less than 2 per cent of Indigenous Australian students attended independent community controlled schools (Schwab 1996).

Retention and achievement

The retention and achievement levels of Indian students tend to be lower than average for the country. For example, in 1989 Indians had the highest high school drop-out rate of all American minorities (36 per cent).[4] In comparison, drop-out rates for Hispanic students in the same year stood at 28 per cent, while the rate for Blacks (22 per cent), Whites (15 per cent) and Asians (8 per cent) were even lower (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 1989). Data for Indigenous Australians are not strictly comparable since 'drop-out' rates are not calculated for Australian students. However, Australian data are available that show retention rates for Indigenous students and they suggest that, by comparison, more Indian students remain in secondary school to graduation than do Indigenous Australians. These rates calculate the proportion of students who are still enrolled in courses they began in earlier years. The 'apparent retention rate' for the cohort of year eight Indigenous Australian students reaching year 12 in 1989 was 16.5 per cent (Yunupingu 1994: 60).

Social costs

The link between education and employment in the Indigenous population is well established; higher levels of participation in school and educational attainment do provide a significant economic return (Daly et al. 1993, Daly 1994). At the same time, many argue that low participation and retention rates often correlate with high social costs. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody analysis of the backgrounds of the 99 individuals who died in custody revealed several broad patterns over a range of indicators. Looking at the highest level of education attained by those 99 individuals gives pause: about 40 per cent of them had not gone beyond primary school and 90 per cent had not gone beyond 'some secondary' (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, vol. 1: 43).

National reviews of Indigenous education in both the United States and Australia emphasise the significance of parent and community involvement in increasing student performance (United States Department of Education, Indian Nations at Risk Task Force 1991; Yunupingu 1995). Indigenous Australians recognise, as do American Indian people, the need to develop new approaches to engage schools and communities and there has been significant effort expended on this issue in recent years. Before exploring some examples of innovative and promising approaches to building partnerships between schools and communities in the United States, it is necessary to understand the evolution of Indigenous education policy in that country. While there are certainly similarities in the experience of Indigenous people in Australia and the United States, there are also significant legal and historical differences.

The evolution of Indigenous policy in the United States

To understand the intricacies of American Indian education policy in the United States today, one must place that policy against the backdrop of the history of the relationships between individual tribes and the United States

Government. From the point of view of most Indian people today, the nature of that relationship is fundamental not only to the past, but to the future as well.

Treaties

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, 931 million hectares of land were held by Indigenous people in what is today the United States of America. Between 1492 and 1776, a variety of Europeans explored, claimed and then began to colonise that land. Initially, Indian lands were quickly reduced as populations declined in the face of new diseases. The declining numbers made it easier for colonists to take land through violence or negotiation. Following the defeat of the British in the War of Independence, it was clear that the new American nation faced another important challenge: how to deal with the various independent Indian nations. Following British precedence in treating Indian nations as sovereign entities, the first national constitution, the Articles of Confederation (1781), authorised the national government to supervise relations with Indian nations (Bolt 1987: 37). This government-to-government model typified in the 'treaty' was significant for two reasons. First, it provided a legal basis for the relationships between individual tribes that remains valid today. Second, it provided a bureaucratic mechanism to legally divest Indians of their land (Adams 1995: 5).

During the course of over 100 years, hundreds of separate treaties were entered into with Indian nations by the United States Government. Many of these are still in effect and involve a diverse range of agreements. For example, many of these agreements are based on military, political and economic alliances while others arise from earlier agreements involving fishing and hunting rights. These treaties provide a solid legal and moral base for the fiduciary responsibilities of the United States Government toward Indian people, usually as a result of 'sales' of Indian land.

By the end of 'the Treaty period' (1778-1871) most of the land retained by Indians had been ceded to the government - only 57 million of the original 932 million hectares remained. Today, after another 100 years of legislative fiat, trickery and bad decision-making (sometimes also by Indians) about 23 million hectares (about 2 per cent) of the original land remains in Indian hands (National Advisory Council on Indian Education 1993: 40). Today over 800 separate treaties between Native Americans and the United States government remain in place (Kickingbird and Charleston 1993: 113).

Education and 'civilisation'

By the late 1700s many treaties contained provisions related to the education of Indians, often in the form of 'civilisation programs' aimed at teaching Indians how to become farmers. In 1819 the United States Congress established the 'civilisation fund'. This fund provided an annual appropriation of $10,000 to be used to protect against the further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes and for introducing the fruits and industries of civilisation through education (Adams 1995: 6). This Act also marked the assumption by the United States Federal Government of responsibility for the protection of Indian boundaries, removal of intruders on Indian land, and punishment of crimes committed by Whites against Indian people (Bolt 1987: 43). In the ensuing years, a variety of educational programs were established and several manual training schools were created.

The Removal Act of 1830 authorised the President to provide public lands for eastern Indians willing to move west, beyond the 'settled' areas of the east. Within ten years, most of the eastern Indians had been relocated and 41 million hectares of Indian land east of the Mississippi river had been secured through 70 treaties. In return, Indians received about 13 million hectares west of the river and $68 million (Bolt 1987: 60). With continued westward expansion of the American State in the mid-19th century, a dramatic new phase in Indian policy emerged. Frustrated with the large size and low productivity of Indian lands, developers and pioneers pushed for the containment of Indian tribes on reservations. During the period 1853 to 1856, 52 new treaties were negotiated that resulted in the forced movement of tribes to newly established 'Indian territories' in return for about 70 million hectares of land (Bolt 1987: 68).

In 1871 the United States government passed a law formally ending treaty making with Indian nations and attempted to dilute the government-to-government relationships that had persisted to that time. Policy from this time promoted acculturation of Indians on reservations, emphasising the passing on of the dominant culture without forcing the absorption of Indians into the wider society. The policy theme continued with passage of the Dawes Act, technically titled the General Allotment Act of 1887, which allowed the United States President to divide existing reservations and allocate tracts to individual Indians; once land had been allocated (about 65 hectares to family heads, 32 hectares to single persons over 18 years of age, and 16 hectares to single persons under 18 years of age) the remaining 'surplus' reservation lands could be sold to White settlers. The proceeds of the surplus land sales were to be held by the Government for tribal 'education and civilisation'. The policy was clearly intended to break down tribal connections, force Indians to work the land as farmers or pastoralists, and to end the ration system which had for so long been a centrepiece of relations between the United States government and Indian people (Adams 1995: 17).

The emergence of Indian education policy

The next 50 years saw a range of strategies for Indian education. The most basic avenue for Indian education in the early years of this period was the reservation day-school. These schools drew children from surrounding camps and focused on language instruction, basic arithmetic and industrial training. Children would return home in the afternoon carrying, it was hoped, the message of civilisation. Though there were over 100 such schools by the late 1870s, administrators were disappointed with the inability of day schools to wean children from the culture of the surrounding camps. One solution, it was suggested, was a boarding school where teachers could better 'protect' Indian children from the wayward influences of the 'traditional' culture. These schools were located on the reservations and afforded greater control over the lives of children than did the day-schools. Yet these were still Indian schools, surrounded by everyday reservation life and students had no first-hand exposure to White civilisation. The logical extension of the reservation boarding school was the off-reservation school. Such schools were envisaged to be the ideal mechanism for assimilating Indian children. Removed from the influence of the reservation, these institutions provided for the immersion of Indian children into White civilisation.

By 1905 over 30 per cent of the Indian students in the United States were attending off-reservation boarding schools; less than 0.3 per cent attended public schools. The off-reservation schools eventually lost favour, and by 1925 students in such schools accounted for only about 13 per cent of enrolments. In the meantime, the proportion of Indian students enrolled in public schools had risen to over 52 per cent (Adams 1995: 320). This drop in off-reservation enrolments was coincidental with realisations that Indians appeared incapable of rapid assimilation, that boarding schools in separating children from their families were unjustifiably cruel, that such schools only perpetuated long-term dependency on government, and that Indian culture might be an avenue rather than an obstacle to effective education (Adams 1995: 308). At the same time, there were calls to transfer responsibility for Indian education to public schools. These calls were eventually accompanied by financial inducements to encourage local school districts to take on Indian students. While less practical in the past, the expansion of White settlement and the development of the reservation system wherein Indians and White settlers increasingly found themselves in close proximity made such an option feasible.

Federal payments to States in support of Indian education were formalised by the Johnson-O'Malley Act of 1934. These funds were tied to the promotion of education that emphasised instruction of Indian children in their own communities and the development of skills of value to those communities (Bolt 1987: 114). The devolution of educational responsibility to the States was a significant departure and marked an important change in the governmental relationships - not just between the Federal Government and the States, but between tribes and States. It was also an important indicator of continuing government promotion of Indian assimilation.

From termination to self-determination

The assimilation movement peaked in 1953 with the passage of House Concurrent Resolution 108 - the infamous Termination Act. Essentially, this Act and subsequent pieces of legislation made Indian land subject to property taxes and eliminated the provision of special services provided in treaty agreements by the Federal Government (including educational services). Under this Act, tribes were no longer recognised as independent political entities; they were legally terminated. Remarkably, in the midst of cold war hysteria and in an era of indifference to Indian policy issues, a number of bills terminating individual tribes were passed by the United States Congress without debate (Nagel 1996: 218-19).

In the rhetoric of the day, this Act was promoted as giving Indians the same 'rights' as all other citizens, but it effectively dissolved the special trust relationship and voided the recognition of the sovereign status of Indian governments. The Act was designed to settle all outstanding land claims and resolve existing treaty disputes, to facilitate the training of reservation Indians for wage labour jobs and to relocate these trainees to urban areas.[5] In 1950, prior to the implementation of relocation policies as part of the Termination Act, 13 per cent of American Indians lived in urban areas; by 1970 that proportion had more than tripled to 44.5 per cent. It is estimated that in the 20 years between 1952 and 1972 more than 100,000 Indians were relocated to urban centres (Sorkin 1978).[6]

The termination policy had run its course by 1970 and the era of self-determination ushered in. By that time, however, over 70 tribes had been affected by the Act. In the worst cases, tribes were suddenly 'erased' in the sense that they no longer had legal recognition or access to the resources and support inscribed in treaties. Typically, termination involved the allocation of a capital payment and swift transition to State governance. The result was not economic independence or even assimilation but often a total collapse of tribal economies and increased dependence on the State and Federal governments. In 1968 the United States Congress passed legislation allowing reversals of termination if both the tribes and governing States agreed, but by 1975 new legislation allowed tribes to retrocede without the consent of the States (Bolt 1987: 140). Today, many of the 'terminated' tribes are once again recognised by the Federal Government, though State recognition of sovereign nation status remains problematic for most Indian tribes.

The self-determination policies of the 1970s signalled a new phase in the relationships between Indian tribes and the United States Government. Treaty rights were reaffirmed, urban relocation programs halted and control of the local BIA programs and policies was devolved to the tribes. During this phase, the Indian Education Act of 1972 and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 set the stage for contemporary Indian education in the United States. The first of these Acts granted funds for supplementary programs for Indian students and provided for local Indian parent committees to oversee such programs. The Act thus provided reason and resources to encourage the involvement of Indian parents in the education of their children. In addition, the Act created an independent Indian education advisory body, the National Advisory Council on Indian Education. The 1975 Act directed the Bureau of Indian Affairs to offer to contract out to Native governments various services, including education, previously administered by the Bureau. This marked a major transition in relations between the Government and Indian tribes and, on many Indian reservations, placed responsibility for local education in the hands of Indian people. Subsequent legislation has continued to promote self-determination and control in education and other arenas at the community level. However, the degree to which such educational self-determination and community control have actually been achieved is hotly contested by many Indian people (Kickingbird and Charleston 1993: 139-45).

Though a minority of Indian students attend BIA schools today, the political changes of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a range of new programs and initiatives affecting the education of all Indian children. Many of these have been successful, others have failed dismally. The following section provides a glimpse of an Indian school which is part of a public school district. Many of the challenges facing Indian children and parents will be familiar to Indigenous Australians as well.

Community involvement in education: brief case study of an Indian school

Grey Wolf Elementary School is located on the Grey Wolf Indian Reservation in the western United States.[7] It is typical of reservation schools and illustrates the complexities faced in attempting to increase community involvement in education. Grey Wolf is situated in a rural region, about two hours from a major metropolitan centre. A State highway runs through the middle of the reservation. The reservation was established in the mid-19th century when members of the Grey Wolf tribe were moved to the reservation under a treaty whereby millions of hectares were given over to the local White governmental authorities for $150,000 and assorted benefits. Today, the reservation consists of about one-twentieth of the Grey Wolf traditional lands.

In the early 1940s, the United States war effort required large amounts of timber and the Grey Wolf people entered into a 20 year contract to cut 500 million board feet of reservation timber. This marked the beginning of the large-scale development of Grey Wolf resources. The proceeds of this sale provided dividend payments to tribal members and enabled the purchase of a sawmill and plywood plant. Subsequently, this formed the foundation of a major wood products industry. By the mid-1950s, hydro-electric development in the region resulted in the construction of a dam on a traditional fishing site to which the Grey Wolf tribe still retained treaty rights. A multi-million dollar compensation settlement was used for community infrastructure development; a portion of these monies was used to fund an external study of reservation resources and to construct a reservation development plan.

In the 1960s, with earnings from raw timber and wood products and annual lease payments from additional hydro-electric projects on tribal lands, the Grey Wolf tribe began to reacquire their original lands and implemented the reservation development plan. Today, the tribe employs its members in a variety of industries ranging from manufacturing to clothing production to tourism. Like many American Indian tribes, the Grey Wolf have also established a major gaming industry and have recently completed a casino that sits prominently on the highway attracting travellers and holiday-makers who previously passed through the reservation without stopping. With a tribal population of a few thousand, the Grey Wolf tribal council distributes per capita payments of around $2,000 a year for every member; the tribal gross payroll was about $24 million in 1993.

Grey Wolf Elementary School

Grey Wolf Elementary School sits just off the highway slightly away from the centre of town. The school comprises a cluster of buildings that represent the history of education on the reservation. At one end stands a two-storey brick structure, the former BIA dormitory school. On either side stand sprawling single-storey buildings typical of American suburban schools built during the 1950s and 1960s. Further afield stands a collection of demountable classrooms which like demountable classrooms everywhere give the impression that they have been there and will remain for a long time to come. The playground is bitumen and the sound of children playing is often drowned out by the sound of freight trucks shifting to lower gears and applying air brakes as they reduce their speed as the highway passes through Grey Wolf.

There are 400-500 students in the school who attend kindergarten through to grade four. Part of the Lone Pine school district, Grey Wolf Elementary has an Indian Principal (one of a handful in the State) and one Indian teacher; the other 31 teachers are non-Indian. With very few exceptions, all of the students are Indian and, in this part of the reservation, White faces attract attention - there is no mistaking Grey Wolf Elementary for other schools in the Lone Pine District. After grade four, Grey Wolf children travel by bus to Lone Pine, a medium-sized rural town with truck stops, a K-Mart and a McDonalds. The bus ride to Lone Pine takes 35 minutes but for the students it is a ride to another world, and the sudden shift to minority status is difficult for many of the children. The drop-out rate for Indian high school students far exceeds that of non-Indians; the graduation rate for Grey Wolf students is about 20 per cent.

The Grey Wolf classrooms are colourful, bright and filled with the excited sounds of children engaged in learning. The teachers are clearly devoted to the children and teachers are unable to walk through the school grounds without a swarm of affectionate children in tow. Still, attendance at the school is sporadic and student performance on national tests is invariably the lowest in the school district.

According to school staff, Grey Wolf is plagued by alcohol and drug abuse and this takes a toll on the children in the school. The Indian liaison officer describes high levels of poverty for many of the children and disarray in family life for some. The staff are particularly concerned for the growing number of children who are unsupervised at home and dependent on federally subsidised and means-tested school breakfast and lunch programs for the main meals of the day; most of the children in the school qualify for this program. According to the Principal, some of the things taken for granted by White families, such as food in the cupboard or children's books, are absent from many of the Grey Wolf homes. The tribe has its own child protection agency and the residential quarters next to the school are by all accounts too often in use; children 'in protection' are typically removed by the tribe to protect them from abuse and neglect at home. School-age children continue to attend classes at the elementary school while residing in the child protection agency shelter.

Teen pregnancy rates are high in Grey Wolf and the school district counsellor says it is not uncommon for 11 and 12 year olds to be sexually active on the reservation. Though there are signs they are diminishing, gangs have been present in the Elementary School in recent times. That gangs could exist in a rural school that serves children only through to Grade Four indicates, said one teacher, 'the times we live in'.

The school staff see parental involvement with education as the key to fostering parental commitment to learning and as the best mechanism for overcoming some of these problems, but so far they have had little success in drawing parents into the school. They have tried many of the standard approaches but, while they may work in White suburbs, they have failed on the reservation. Parent-teacher organisations have not succeeded in drawing in parents and, while special parent groups looked promising for a time, attendance ultimately fell away. School carnivals, pow-wows, awards events, fun runs and arts and crafts lessons have all been used in an attempt to bring the community into the school but they have not succeeded in sustaining a meaningful level of involvement.

With an energetic and creative principal, devoted and talented teachers, parents who care, yet who for whatever reason do not 'connect' with the school, Grey Wolf typifies the problems of too many Indian schools and Indian communities. Though there is no simple answer to the problem of parental involvement in education in Indigenous communities, there are some promising models in the United States that may be worth considering in Australia.

Promising approaches to Indian community involvement in education

The BIA Consolidated School Reform Plan

The BIA is part of the United States Department of Interior and operates a variety of programs focusing on areas as diverse as Indian law enforcement, social services and land management. A major area of responsibility is Indian education. Historically, the BIA was the main provider of education for Indian populations across the nation. From the beginning of the century, however, responsibility gradually shifted to mainstream public schools and today the BIA funds or operates 187 schools in 23 States on 63 reservations. By 1986, the BIA schools became a distributed system specialising in serving Indian children in special circumstances or with particular needs. Many of these students were considered 'at risk' or lived in regions remote from public school districts (St Germaine 1995a: 31). Roughly half of the 187 schools are operated by the BIA's Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP), the others are funded through OIEP grants.

In the late 1980s, and in the wake of the Effective Schools Movement, the OIEP began to develop a school evaluation program (St Germaine 1995a).[8] Over the course of several years a team of evaluators visited each of the BIA schools and collected data on enrolment, attendance and progress. Interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and students. The outcome was an assessment of each school's effectiveness in each of 11 correlates developed in consultation with BIA schools involved in the process:

The BIA's Effective Schools' Correlates

1. Clear School Mission - a clearly understood and accepted purpose statement that guides local education and a driving force for the education process to meet the unique needs of students.
2. Monitoring and Feedback of Student Progress - measuring student progress on the intended curriculum through a variety of means and relating progress to students and others in a positive manner.
3. Curriculum and Instruction - should be based on locally defined needs, reflect the culture and be developed with staff involvement. Educational activities should be focused around the outcomes we want students to demonstrate.
4. Opportunity to Learn - an intensive engagement where students can learn and demonstrate the intended outcomes.
5. High Expectations - an atmosphere of challenge and confidence where students and staff develop to their full potential.
6. Safe and Supportive Environment - a nurturing environment conducive to learning where all are respected and where children, staff and community can grow together to be the best.

7. Home/School/Community Relations - home, school and community have a clear understanding of the school's mission through open and active exchange of information and communication and active involvement of the community.
8. Strong Instructional Leadership - the combined effort of all instructional staff involved in the learning process by guiding, modeling, sharing, and seeking to meet the needs of students and staff.
9. Participatory Management/Shared Governance - shared decision-making by parents, students, staff, administration, and tribe which enables all involved to feel their contributions are important and valued, and develops a sense of ownership among the groups.
10. Cultural Relevance - the enhancement of tribal culture, integrated into all areas of a school, which supports student self-esteem, respect and success.
11. Administration - management functions in school operations are administered in a manner supportive of quality education.

(As quoted in St Germaine 1995a: 33-4.)

Following the site visits, schools received quantitative summaries to assist them in measuring how well they were meeting the needs of their students and communities. These summaries highlighted both strengths and weaknesses and provided a baseline for measuring subsequent improvements.

The next stage in the process represented an evolution of the role of the original OIEP evaluation and monitoring teams. Beginning in 1994, BIA school support teams comprising a body of 'distinguished Indian educators' and OIEP staff began on-site school visits providing technical assistance and advice to schools undertaking systemic school reform (St Germaine 1995b). At this stage, the emphasis shifted from evaluation to school improvement planning. At the heart of the reform process today is the provision of staff training, mentoring, technical assistance and funding to the schools involved. The schools work through a 'Consolidated School Reform Plan', based in part on the 11 correlates. Schools implement a carefully constructed model that facilitates the local determination of the school's mission, provides a framework for conducting a needs assessment and guides schools through the process of identifying goals and strategies to enhance teaching and learning, parent involvement, governance, accountability and the like. Further, the framework leads the participants through topics such as participatory management and provides assistance with mechanisms for determining benchmarks, setting timelines, monitoring progress and administering budgets (Bureau Effective Schools Team 1995). While the model is the result of years of consultation and research, it is intended only as a guide, and schools are encouraged to adapt the model to their unique strengths and needs; by mid-1996 all 187 BIA schools had completed, and were beginning to implement, Consolidated School Reform Plans.

The strength in the BIA school reform model is in its bottom-up, grass roots origin and its focus on increasing parental and community involvement in education. Significantly, the model and materials evolved through an ongoing process of conversation and consultation between the BIA and local communities. In this sense, the shape of local education is locally determined, and the primary focus is always on assessing local educational needs, designing a local educational system to meet those needs and establish local quality and accountability mechanisms.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Community/School Development Partnership

Schools have long attempted to connect with their local communities. Traditionally, this has been accomplished through: including community members on school boards, councils or committees so as to provide a community voice in educational decision-making; soliciting community input in curriculum design or including local culture or language; and through enlisting community volunteers as guest teachers, cultural consultants or classroom aides (Nelson and Fager 1996). The success of such efforts has always been patchy and somewhat unpredictable. Many of these efforts are met with an initial blush of enthusiasm, but interest often wanes with time. Frequently, a small group of individuals who are either highly committed or highly critical are all that remain; too often, schools find their interaction with the community is based on an ongoing dialogue with the converted and the unconvertible.

A new and promising approach to community-school collaboration has emerged from recent work by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) involving community renewal and development efforts in depressed rural areas in the United States.[9] During 1992 and 1993, NWREL piloted the Community/School Development Partnership (CDP) project with three small rural communities. The hypothesis that underpinned the project was that schools are central elements of community infrastructure and that they should function as a key resource for community development (Miller 1995a). Using a variety of group process tools, NWREL staff worked with communities to assess local needs, establish a vision, develop leadership, advance knowledge and skills, build consensus and implement a plan of action for community renewal. The plan was focused on engaging the community and the school in a partnership to achieve a vision and set of goals determined by the community (Miller 1993).

The evaluation of this pilot study highlighted school improvement efforts given shape by the visions and goals of the local communities. Curriculum, instruction, and school management were moulded, to varying degrees, by the community vision. For example, the three communities determined their local goals and established a series of task forces comprising students, teachers and various community members. One task force was instrumental in developing a community volunteer program for the elementary school, another in arranging adult computer education classes, and a third linked students with local trades persons and teachers in the construction of a recreation centre. In all three sites, the project strove to interweave community needs and interests with curriculum and instruction; the outcome has been not only increased involvement of the community with education but enhanced learning in the context of community action (Miller 1993). Thus the project also provided meaningful community-based learning experiences for students through an expanded vision of appropriate curriculum (Miller 1995b).

The CDP evaluation identified the crucial need for strong and continuous leadership in the schools. Traditionally, many schools have been in but not of their communities and the CDP approach focuses on overcoming strong boundaries between the two. A major commitment to crossing these boundaries is required by all involved. While not a panacea, the CDP model suggests a fresh approach to increasing community involvement with education.

Though the initial project focused on heterogeneous rural communities, the approach is currently being extended to Indian communities with increased effort on facilitating school improvement as part of the overall process. NWREL staff believe the approach will have particular relevance to the needs of Indigenous communities, a perspective shared by the communities that have agreed to participate as pilot sites in the next phase of the project.

The strength of the CDP approach is that it inverts the traditional model of community involvement in education. Where schools have usually looked to communities for validation of existing curricula and instructional practice and have sought input in the context of existing educational structures, the CDP project has explored means to place the school in the context of the needs and visions of the community. Such an orientation has exciting possibilities for Indigenous Australian communities where the school is a foreign institution and where many parents have had negative experiences with education (Schwab 1996).

Policy implications

In a recent article on the difficulties of enacting educational change, Tyack and Tobin (1994) refer to the 'grammar' of schooling. Using grammar as a metaphor they describe the enduring stability of classroom practices, institutional structures and administrative rules that have long characterised instruction in Western systems of education. As they point out, breaking the constraints of traditional classroom practice is extraordinarily difficult; the history of education is littered with discarded innovations.

According to Tyack and Tobin (1994: 476), the organisational patterns that shape instruction are historical products arising from the practices of individuals with particular interests and values in particular times and places. The durability of the grammar of schooling can be challenged, they suggest, only through a broadening of the dialogue about educational change beyond the walls of the institution. Following this lead, it is useful to extend the grammar of schooling metaphor beyond the classroom to include the school itself and its relationship to the wider community. From this vantage point it is clear that not only are instructional practices inherently conservative, but so too are perceptions, behaviours and structures that shape and constrain an institution's interactions with the wider community.

The grammar of schooling perpetuates the separation of a series of domains: of students from teachers, teachers from parents, and school from home. School reform efforts tend to move through a series of activities along a course envisaged by those 'qualified' and experienced in education: teachers and administrators. When others are brought into the process to contribute their expertise (for example, parents and community members), they are often caught in a tide of assumptions and understandings and quickly learn to go with the institutional flow or abandon the effort bewildered, frustrated or both. The continuing separation of such domains thus contributes to institutional inertia.

The boundaries between various participants and interest groups are durable and transgressions from one domain to another are often politically and culturally difficult: parents who attempt to influence their child's schooling cross into the domain of the teacher; teachers who advise parents on how to assist their children cross into the domain of the family; when community agencies or bureaucracies attempt to link their services to schools they cross bureaucratic boundaries (Davies 1996: 83). In a recent examination of literacy practice in Victorian schools, for example, it was found that while 100 per cent of the polled schools asked parents to read to their children, none provided literacy instruction for parents who themselves experience reading difficulties (Toomey 1996). It would appear that in this case the boundaries between home and school and between teacher and parent were formidable.

The relevance of this issue for Australia is noted in a recent comprehensive review of literacy programs in Australia that identified a need for programs that focus on the boundaries between the home and school (Cairney et al. 1995; Cairney and Ruge 1996). The review calls for programs that not only address student literacy but also provide parents with greater understanding of the culture of schools as well as promoting recognition by schools of the cultural practices in the home. An important contribution to increasing understanding in both directions, the review suggests, is possible in building partnerships between the home and the school. The review also notes the significance of cultural factors that come into play in 'the support of literacy in the home and success in school, particularly for specific groups (and calls for) research ... to identify how schools or education systems can work together with specific communities' (Cairney et al. 1995: 158).

The historical durability of educational practice and the boundaries between interested parties clearly contribute to the complexity of educational change. Further, when cultural or class differences are added to the mix, the opportunities for misunderstanding and miscommunication combine to ensure the stability of the system. The Australian educational literature is replete with examples of frustrations of Indigenous parents who have found it difficult if not impossible to engage at any level with the Western education systems in which their children (or they themselves) are enrolled. The importance of addressing this issue for Indigenous students is obvious, though the diverse range of Indigenous communities will provide a significant challenge.

The experience of the BIA school reform and NWREL community development models suggest useful approaches to the problem of Indigenous community involvement in Australia where boundaries between the various domains of education are culturally reinforced. The BIA model is of interest in that it shows how a structured approach to school reform can be designed to meet the very specific needs of Indigenous schools yet be customised to meet the interests of a diverse range of Indigenous communities. Though there is a clear blueprint to guide the local educational community's critical analysis of existing educational structures, there is flexibility in allowing the wider community to identify specific interests and needs. The BIA approach has been successful for a variety of reasons, but the fact that the model evolved out of a series of consultations and conversations with communities - effectively a bottom-up approach to school reform - contrasts sharply with the expert-driven, top-down approach common to many school reform efforts.

The NWREL community development approach is a fresh and exciting strategy with potential for bringing together schools and the wider community. For many Indigenous Australians, schools are an alien institution and while many Indigenous parents feel education is essential for their children, they do not always articulate that perception or feel comfortable in their interactions with local schools. This is as true in major metropolitan areas where Indigenous students are in the minority as in remote regions where Indigenous students form the majority. Over the years endless attempts have been made to promote parental and community commitment to education by bringing parents and other community members into these foreign institutions but few have had long-term success. Linking educational involvement with community development efforts would encourage a new perception of schools in Indigenous communities and suggests a range of new possibilities for involving the school in the community rather than the community in the school. The NWREL approach evolved out of efforts to facilitate community development in rural areas, and adapting the approach to a more diverse and complex urban setting will present some new challenges. Still, there is no reason to believe the approach will not translate to the level of neighbourhood.

Both approaches highlight the importance of ongoing technical assistance in educational reform efforts in Indigenous communities; where the school is itself a foreign institution, communities certainly require help in understanding and implementing a structured reform effort. These two models also show that community involvement in education is time and labour intensive, but that Indigenous community ownership of school reform or community development efforts is a powerful mechanism for beginning to dismantle some of the boundaries between teachers and families and schools and communities.

For years, Australian educational theorists, practitioners and Indigenous community members have been puzzling about the nature and value of Western education. Typified by the phrase, 'education for what?', this conundrum reaches to the very heart of education for Indigenous Australians. What is education for? Who determines its shape? Who benefits from it? The answers to these questions depend in large part on the vantage point of the person asking the question. When cultural, political and structural boundaries separate Indigenous people from participation in the education process, the questions remain largely rhetorical, an expression of dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Yet when schools are drawn into the orbit of community concerns, when schools become tools for building and fulfilling a community vision, the questions take on the tone of urgent practicality.

In their continuing efforts to engage schools and Indigenous communities across Australia, policy makers would do well to consider the BIA and NWREL approaches. Both are based on 'grass-roots' input, both begin by identifying local needs and then move on to designing local educational approaches, and both build long-term commitments and partnerships between schools and communities. These two models appear to have potential as powerful tools for dismantling boundaries between schools and communities in the United States and they could be easily translated and adapted to the Australian context. These approaches are also worth careful consideration in Australia because they suggest a means whereby Indigenous people may more effectively articulate important questions about what education in their communities is for. Most significantly, these approaches could be effective in returning to Aboriginal communities responsibility for building parental and community commitment to education through contributing to the construction of educational institutions that answer those questions while addressing local needs.

Notes

1. The terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Aborigines' are used here to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations of Australia.

2. It is important to acknowledge that a precise definition of Aboriginal 'community' is problematic, particularly in light of the diverse circumstances within which Indigenous Australians live. While some individuals live in relatively culturally homogenous settings, others live as small minorities in urban areas. Given space limitations, this paper will not attempt to resolve this complex problem. Suffice it to say that community involvement efforts may need to take quite different forms in metropolitan centres and remote, isolated locations.

3. Educational policy literature in the United States tends to refer to the Indigenous peoples of that country in three ways: 1. American Indians and Alaska Natives, 2. American Indians, or 3. Indians. According to the United States' National Advisory Council on Indian Education, the second and third forms are most commonly used by the Indigenous people of that country. This paper will follow this convention except where it is useful to discriminate between American Indians and Alaska Natives.

4. These data refer to a cohort of 10th graders who later dropped out of school.

5. The Indian Commissioners of this period were strongly in favour of termination policies. Ironically, Harry Truman's appointee, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Dillon Myer was the former director of the Japanese 'resettlement camps' during World War II. Thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent were imprisoned in these camps to prevent them from spying, carrying out acts of sabotage or giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Myer oversaw the relocation of Indians from reservations to urban areas where they were to form part of the labour pool under the Bureau of Indian Affairs Relocation Program (Kickingbird and Charleston 1993: 134).

6. Ironically, the Termination Act resulted in widespread mobilisation and ethnic renewal among Indians across the country where previously individuals had rarely spoken of pan-Indian interests. The upsurge in Indian activism from the 1960s was one result (Nagel 1996: 118).

7. Grey Wolf Elementary School is a pseudonym as is the name of the reservation described in this section. Other identifying details have been omitted. Otherwise, the details are accurate and are based on documentary materials and interviews and observations conducted during a brief visit in April of 1996.

8. The Effective Schools Movement in the United States can be tracked back to broad ranging attempts at school improvement in the 1960s and 1970s. Initially, these reform movements focused on the improvement of bilingual and science education programs but soon expanded to include reform efforts focused on individual schools (Marsh 1988).

9. The NWREL is an independent, non-profit educational research and development corporation serving the States of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington; core funding for NWREL comes from the United States Department of Education and the United States Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Appendix Table A.1. Distribution by age and sex of American Indian persons, 1990.

	Males		Females		
Age	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Total
0-4	95,665	10.0	92,168	9.4	187,833
5-9	97,633	10.2	91,607	9.4	189,240
10-14	93,240	9.7	88,459	9.0	181,699
15-19	89,944	9.4	83,629	8.5	173,573
20-24	84,871	8.9	79,220	8.1	164,091
25-29	88,729	9.3	89,314	9.1	178,043
30-34	84,272	8.8	90,109	9.2	174,381
35-39	73,526	7.7	79,002	8.1	152,528
40-44	63,082	6.6	66,495	6.8	129,577
45-49	48,434	5.1	50,972	5.2	99,406
50-54	38,059	4.0	40,259	4.1	78,318
55-59	29,377	3.1	33,048	3.4	62,425
60-64	24,565	2.6	27,716	2.8	52,281
65+	47,467	5.0	66,529	6.8	113,996
Total		100.0		100.0	1,937,391

Source: United States Bureau of Census (1995).

Appendix Table A.2. Distribution by age and sex of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons, 1991.

	Males		Females		
Age	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Total
0-4	20,276	15.4	19,237	14.4	39,513
5-9	17,912	13.6	17,239	12.9	35,151
10-14	15,933	12.1	15,151	11.3	31,084
15-19	14,684	11.2	14,249	10.6	28,933
20-24	13,209	10.0	14,178	10.6	27,387
25-29	11,081	8.4	12,008	9.0	23,089
30-34	9,445	7.2	10,227	7.6	19,672
35-39	7,512	5.7	8,258	6.2	15,770
40-44	6,020	4.6	6,503	4.9	12,523
45-49	4,442	3.4	4,527	3.4	8,969
50-54	3,377	2.6	3,613	2.7	6,990
55-59	2,602	2.0	2,765	2.1	5,367
60-64	1,894	1.4	2,295	1.7	4,189
65+	3,061	2.3	3,762	2.8	6,823
Total		100.0		100.0	2,654,60

Source: ABS (1993).

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