Reference No. 83

Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:

Research Publication:
CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 213/2001

Name of Researcher(s):
D.F. Martin

Time period:
2001

Geographic location:
Cape York (Qld.)

Methodology:
Analysis of the writings and speeches of Aboriginal activist lawyer and social commentator Noel Pearson about welfare reform in Aboriginal communities in the context of extensive ethnographic research, within an anthropological framework, undertaken by the researcher in Northern Australian Aboriginal communities.

Aims:
The paper assesses the welfare proposals developed by Noel Pearson and their practical implementation.

Selected findings and insights:
This paper is broadly supportive of the thrust of the welfare reform proposals developed by Noel Pearson, this being:

- the 'passive welfare' policies instituted in Aboriginal communities over the past three decades, with no demands for reciprocity and responsibility on the part of welfare recipients, have promoted detrimental relations of passivity and dependence which are now deeply embedded within Aboriginal societies.
- addressing the dysfunctional consequences of the welfare system for Aboriginal people will require structural change;
- new institutions for Aboriginal governance, both formal and informal, need to be developed; and
- reform of the existing institutional arrangements between government and Aboriginal communities is required.

This paper raises several concerns about the social and cultural underpinnings of these welfare proposals:

- certain widespread Aboriginal values and practices may be contrary to the kinds of social and attitudinal changes which Pearson advocates; and, further,
- these values and practices have not simply arisen as the consequence of the experience of colonialism or the introduction of welfare.
The paper also differentiates between the government concept of ‘mutual obligations’, which involves the individual and the government agency, and Pearson’s views of reciprocity as a form of mutual obligation, which applies to a relationship between the individual and the family or community. Therefore:

- the community and effective governance is central to addressing issues arising from ‘passive welfare’. This paper highlights the difficulties in placing the community, or a community organisation, in such a central role as:
  - Aboriginal residential communities are highly complex and internally differentiated.
  - The sense of loyalty and commitment to such communities required by policy makers is at odds with Indigenous traditions.
  - Their populations are internally differentiated in terms of the factors which continue to inform Aboriginal political, social and economic relations, such as affiliations with ancestral lands and language, personal and group histories, ethnicity, and bearing on all of these, kin group and other local group affiliations.
  - Even within families there is similar diversity of relative roles and responsibilities, and the autonomy of individuals is guarded and attempts by others to control behaviour resisted.

The paper concludes by suggesting that:

- government may need to be involved as partners, including assisting with the development of new Indigenous governance institutions and facilitating capacity-building within those institutional arrangements.

**Educational implications:**

This paper provides important background information about the complexity and diversity of Indigenous communities in which schools operate in remote communities and, to a lesser degree, in non-remote areas. This understanding is helpful in engaging local communities in the education of their children, especially in developing processes for developing effective school community partnerships. In so doing, the paper highlights the need to address the capacity of Indigenous communities to take a lead role in establishing the directions for education in their community. This, in turn, raises the issue of the level of responsibilities government agencies such as schools or district educational offices hold for assisting communities increase their understandings and skills necessary to active, informed participants in school community partnerships. It also suggests that such capacity-building is not straightforward nor can it be achieved in very short timeframes with minimal resources. [school community partnerships]

**Relevance:**

*Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life*

*Domain 2: School Community Educational Partnerships*

  Complexity and diversity of communities

**Related papers:**
