Research Summaries
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Summarising: Morphy (2005), *The language of governance in a cross-cultural context: What can and can't be translated*
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:
The language of governance in a cross-cultural context: What can and can’t be translated

Research Publication:
Indigenous Community Governance Project Occasional Paper No. 3 2005

Name of Researcher(s):
F. Morphy

Time period:
2005

Geographic location:
North-East Arnhem Land (NT)

Methodology:
This paper draws upon the researcher’s experiences over 30 years in undertaking ethnographic research with the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land (NT).

Aims:
The purpose of this paper was to examine the extent to which the language of western governance can be translated effectively into the Yolngu language so that the underlying concepts are maintained.

Selected findings and insights:
This paper draws attention to the non-translatability of some western concepts into Yolngu language and meaning. For example the paper examines the translatability of terms such as:

- fair
- honest

and through these types of examples demonstrates the difficulties in simply adapting western documentation on issues such as ‘governance’ to be used as training materials with Indigenous communities.

The paper also gives insights into leadership within the Yolngu people:

- a Yolngu leader is someone to whom other people listen, a person who can create consensus;
- leadership is only conferred conditionally, and has to be constantly earned. If the word ‘leader’ implies a view of the leader as the apex of a vertical hierarchy, the Yolngu metaphor characterises a leader as being on the same horizontal plane as those who confer authority on him through consensus; and
- leaders are not elected by their ‘constituents’. Yolngu see nothing wrong with their governance, which has its own system of checks and balances. Leaders who lead by consensus are constrained by the need to reproduce consensus. Good governance does not depend crucially on western notions such as fairness.
Yolngu also participate in governance structures that are founded on western principles:

- however, Yolngu bring with them a very different set of ideas from those of English-speaking westerners about how the person is constituted as a thinking, feeling, acting and moral being, and about how the individual is nested in their social and physical universe and their culture.

Because this is so, it is hard even for Yolngu with good English to understand what English governance terms, with all their western cultural baggage, really mean to English-speaking westerners. In the Yolngu view nothing happens or exists independent of its context. In western thought this is considered to be a limitation of ‘non-western’ thinking, but from the Yolngu viewpoint it is the western way of thinking that is limited and peculiar—something that leads westerners to be without roots, almost asocial.

The paper presents an interesting discussion on how Yolngu people see the skills they need for good governance within their own context without the need to take a further step and implant them into a western context. For example:

- the need for financial literacy skills does not necessarily lead to notions of financial independence from the state, acquisition of western attitudes to money management or to greater emphasis upon individual ownership.

Even in the case of changes in current government policy settings, the paper suggests that Yolngu people will adapt those settings to their own context rather than allow themselves to become assimilated into the prevailing policy environment.

**Educational implications:**

The researcher’s conclusions about the relationship between the Yolngu people approach to western governance and their own world view provides several important insights for school leaders working with Indigenous communities in developing partnership arrangements:

- Understanding by Indigenous people of concepts underpinning educational partnership agreements cannot be assumed. Furthermore even if they understand the terms (e.g. through using the term) they may have quite different, but from their point of view legitimate, understandings than westerners.

Awareness of the need of being able to participate ‘cross-culturally’ in discussions would appear extremely important for school staff interacting with Indigenous people in the course of their work, yet this does necessitate a capacity to work across both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. Possibly bicultural Indigenous Australians could have a special role to play in such training and in the facilitation of educational partnership agreements meaningful to both the community and staff. [staff training]

**Relevance:**

*Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life*

*Domain 2: School and Community Education Partnerships*

Use and negotiation of educational partnership agreements between schools and communities