Reference No. 124

Summarising: Smith (2005), Indigenous Families, Households and Governance
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.

Research Publication:
Article in. Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia, eds. Diane Austin-Broos and Gaynor Macdonald, Sydney University Press, 2005

Name of Researcher(s):
D.E. Smith

Title of Research:
Indigenous Families, Households and Governance

Time period:
The research was undertaken between 1999 and 2001

Geographic location:
The research was undertaken in Kuranda (Qld.) and Yuendumu (NT).

Methodology:
This research combines both ethnographic data-gathering and quantitative analysis to the study of ‘family’, ‘households’ and ‘governance’ in the Kuranda and Yuendumu communities. The paper also draws upon previous research from a range of communities — rural, urban and remote.

Aims:
The paper aims to provide insights about:

• contemporary Indigenous family and household formation and domestic economies in Australia;
• the impact of mobility on families and their households;
• the role of parenting and child-rearing; and
• the relationship between family structure and community governance.

Selected findings and insights:
The research concludes that the ‘family’ is the ‘central ordering principle’ within Indigenous social and economic life.

While the nuclear or elementary family is important, it is not the most common residential or structural form. Rather extended families dominate Indigenous social and economic life. Membership of extended families is open to interpretation and negotiation over time, based on historical association, friendship, political alliances and engagement in processes such as native title and land rights.

• at the community level, between 50-60% of households had three or more generations present, and the average household had 6.5 members compared with the Australian average of 2.7 persons.

In the two surveyed communities, 43% and 48% of residents were under the age of 16 years. Indigenous families were big and reproducing young families at a greater rate than non-Indigenous families.
Temporary mobility was a key feature of Indigenous families and households:

- Just over half of one community had stayed overnight in places in the local area other than their own household in the previous four weeks.
- Children traveled with and without their parents and siblings, and this flow was unpredictable. Some 50% of children in the same households sometimes resided in other places in the same community.
- In another community, during the course of a fortnight, in one four-bedroom house, the composition of residents was recorded. During that period, there was an average of 21.9 persons staying at the house per night, with an average of 13.7 adults and 6.8 children. However, there were, in fact, 27 different related adults and 15 different children sleeping at this house over the fortnight.
- There was a relatively stable ‘core’ of family members at the heart of many households. The stable family members often appeared to be senior adult kin.

The households of many families were characterised by a complex life cycle of expansion, contraction, disintegration and re-formation.

- A high proportion of Indigenous children were living in households where they had either no biological parent or only one parent resident, but where other relations, such as a person of the grandparental or parents’ siblings’ generation looked after them. For example, three-quarters of households in one rural community had children resident who were the biological children of non-resident adults.

Educational implications:

The paper’s detailed account of the composition of Indigenous families and households, family mobility, the nature of extended families, parenting responsibilities and shared child care arrangements has direct implications for the effective introduction of educational partnerships between the school and community and the delivery of educational services. These are threefold:

- Determining who might be the most appropriate person to be a ‘signatory’ on an agreement regarding the education of a student will not be straightforward as several people may be responsible for and assist in the development of the student;
- Responsibility of parents or care-givers for monitoring student behaviour such as school attendance and assisting with learning will be made all that more difficult by the high mobility of young people between households;
- Increased understanding among school staff is needed about the home-life of Indigenous students and the impact this may have upon learning; and
- Providing a learning environment is difficult within overcrowded living conditions.

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life

Domain 2 - School and Community Educational Partnerships

Complexity and diversity of communities

Domain 1 - Early Childhood Education.
Related papers:

Y. Musharbash, 'Indigenous families and the welfare system: The Yuendumu community case study, Stage Two' *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 217*, 2001

R. Henry and A.E. Daly 'Indigenous families and the welfare system: The Kuranda community case study, Stage Two' *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 216*, 2001