

A RETURN TO THE REAL WORLD ECONOMY

A work socialisation scheme for young people from Cape York Peninsula – Pilot Project

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1. Introduction

The Community Development Employment Projects scheme (CDEP scheme) was introduced in 1977 with the objective of providing work for unemployed Indigenous persons. It was promoted as a positive alternative to continued reliance on welfare payments. According to Solar, “*It was designed to assist in overcoming the extremely deleterious effects of chronic unemployment on remote communities* (2003, p.16).” The reality, however, is that participants work for what is basically their unemployment benefits and, as such, the scheme has a welfare base doing little to address the effects of passive welfare dependency (Arthur, 2002).

In addition, at the time the scheme was introduced, little attention was given to the fact that some jobs may be just as harmful as unemployment. Repeated performance of jobs that are boring, hold low status and subject to autocratic or laissez-faire supervision can counteract the potential beneficial effects of employment (Feather and O’Brien, 1986). It can be argued that many CDEP scheme positions fall into this category.

In 1998, the objective of the scheme was amended to include the promise that some CDEP scheme positions will lead to unsubsidised employment (Arthur, 2002). This objective was not realised. According to Shergold, “*It has been an abysmal failure* (2001, p.70).”

Today there remains very few employment options outside CDEP scheme for young Indigenous people living on Cape York Peninsula. Of more concern is that many young people living on Cape York do not have the will, nor the life skills, to engage in anything other than the CDEP scheme. The author believes that in part this has been due to the lack of **working** males (and working females) having little or no responsibility for the care and rearing of their children. According to Martin, “*As parents become younger, and as men withdrew from the economic support and the responsibilities for the rearing of the children, grandmothers played ever more crucial roles in maintaining household viability and in the nurturing of their grandchildren* (1993, p.172).” Therefore, many young people have grown to maturity “*where there was no formal, socially legitimated means by which they were removed from the indulged world of women* (1993, p.172).” The author has personally observed that this “indulged world of women” includes welfare dependent grandmothers, mothers and aunties actively dis-encouraging their young male kin from performing any sort of serious or strenuous work.

Knowingly or otherwise, our society has contributed to yet another generation of Indigenous people destined to a life of dependency along with associated feelings of inferiority and stagnation in their psychosocial development.

It would appear that we were warned. In 1974, a social worker named John Tomlinson gave notice, "*The institutionalisation of so many people in the welfare-rehabilitative style rather than the engaging of people in the producer-consumer struggle of the wider society has the effect of mortgaging future generations*". Likewise, Coombs (1973) warned that "*present policies are producing a race of cripples*". They pointed to the urgency of working effectively with what was then a very small population rather than waiting twenty years and trying to work with double the population. Over thirty years have now passed and we do indeed have what can be described as a "generation of cripples".

2. Aim of this pilot project

The aim of this pilot project is to assess the concept of a work socialisation scheme designed to integrate young Indigenous people from Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait into mainstream employment and the non-welfare economy.

This project will help form the basis of future program and policy development by the Cape York Institute of Policy and Leadership.

3. Overview of this work placement scheme

This work placement scheme is based upon the fact that there are very few employment options outside CDEP scheme for young Indigenous people living on Cape York Peninsula. If young people are to be assisted in taking up unsubsidised mainstream employment they must be willing and able to pursue opportunities off Cape York.

The success of the 'Boys from the Bush' program to move young Indigenous people to work long and hard away from their community in the service of their own program is well recognised. This success has been due to the strong element of tailored individual supports combined with a good understanding of how environments strongly determine behaviour. The 'Boys from the Bush' program has demonstrated how behavioural change can be achieved by providing support and supervision in a new pro-social real work environment (James, 2003, 2004).

The author has concluded that successful participation in mainstream employment and the non-welfare economy can be achieved by the further refinement of these same elements, combined with the practise skills and wisdom of the 'Boys from the Bush' program. In essence, this scheme will socialise young people into work and the non-welfare economy while they are still young and impressionable. This socialisation will take the form of strong tailored individual support and supervision within selected real world environments. The main characteristics of this scheme are discussed below.

3.1 Work placements will be well away from the negative influences of peers, family and community.

Young people refusing to attend school and work are common place on Cape York Peninsula. In most cases, this appears to result from the lack of an educational and work ethic, combined with the unrestricted, unconditional licence endowed upon young people by their families and community at large. One solution to this problem has been to send young people to school well away from the destructive influences of peers, family and community. Experience has shown that these schools or work

placements must be located far enough to deter the young person from running back to family and community as soon as conformity is required and restrictions applied. This has proven to be a most effective strategy and has been adopted by this work placement scheme.

5.2 Participants will be placed for short periods of time.

A number of young people sent away to boarding schools or work programs do in fact miss their home, family and friends. Some young people cannot cope being away from home and family for any great length of time. Young people involved in this scheme will also experience varying degrees of homesickness. On the other hand, there are a number of young people who value not just their personal freedom but desire to live a totally uninhibited life – free of all responsibility towards self and others. It is this that drives many young people to try and return back home where they live a near totally uninhibited life.

More often than not, it will take time to replace highly dependent, anti-social behaviour with a new sense of autonomy and improved pro-social behaviour. This work placement scheme will strike a balance between these two factors – 1) the need for a prolonged exposure to new patterns of behaviour and 2) the genuine plea of ‘homesickness’. This work socialisation scheme will therefore seek out jobs that last for 2 or 3 months with varying lengths of time between placements that will be subject to individual needs assessments.

5.3 Jobs will be for small groups or singular position.

To help balance this need for a prolonged exposure to new patterns of behaviour and genuine pleas of ‘homesickness, participants will be given the opportunity to be placed along with a family member or friend. This small peer group will share a common identity, language, mannerisms, needs and concerns and will therefore be able to provide mutual support. This mutual support during difficult times is an important ingredient to a successful work placement.

5.4 When required, effective peer supervision will be provided.

Where this strategy of peer group placements is used, it may be necessary to include a peer supervisor. These peer supervisors will be chosen from the pool of effective participants of the ‘Boys from the Bush’ program. Without peer supervisors, groups may run the risk of letting negative peer group influences overwhelm the group objectives. The ‘Boys from the Bush’ program knows all too well how rational thought processes can easily be abandoned by groups of young people with low impulse control and undeveloped social consciences. Critical self-analysis of the inherent consequences of their behaviour can, at times, become near impossible. The ‘Boys from the Bush’ program is also very experienced in the practice of placing selected young Indigenous supervisors into groups of young people to provide necessary leadership, discipline and support.

5.5 Jobs will fit their actual ability.

Many young Indigenous people on Cape York Peninsula are poorly educated and will continue to fall behind in the skills needed for successful participation in the mainstream work force and the non-welfare economy. At best, most young people are destined for unskilled labouring positions. This, however, should not be viewed as a reason for not engaging in work. What is unfortunate is when young people aged in

their early to mid teens who can barely read and write and have a series of behavioural problems are told that if they go to school and study hard they could one day become a doctor or lawyer. This (in all but rare cases) is nonsense and just adds to the confusion and false hopes of these young people. It is wrong to encourage young people to build their aspirations on fantasies. Likewise, it is wrong to say to these young people that if you do well at sports they could be a Cathy Freeman or a Wendell Sailor one day. Very few young Indigenous people have made a successful career in sports. Privileged or exceptionally talented people do not make for good effective role models for those who are not privileged or talented. More effective role models are ordinary people who are doing well - people that the average young person can identify with.

The 'Boys from the Bush' program promotes ordinary young people who take pride in work, especially hard physical work. Good labourers are well respected, well rewarded, highly prized people. The best are promoted as role models. They are taught to take pride in being a fruit and vegetable picker, or a ganger on the railways, or a deck hand on a trawler. There is no pride however in being dependent on welfare or a participant in a welfare program.

The type of jobs considered suitable for this scheme will be:

- * Seasonal fruit and vegetable picking in southern States
- * Unskilled farm/station hand
- * Deck hands on commercial fishing boats
- * Sales persons or shelf stackers in retail shops and stores
- * Labourers in the construction industry
- * Labourers in the processing industry
- * Labourers in the maintenance and cleaning industry
- * Unskilled factory workers

These jobs will be located in cities, regional centres, country towns, rural or remote locations. Some jobs will pay by the hour (wages), others will be piecework - paid on productivity.

All participants will be required to pay for their own board and keep while working in these positions.

5.6 At the completion of the job, they will be returned, debriefed and reabsorbed back into an educational environment while they are prepared for their next position.

A single successful work placement for two or three months will not, in itself, constitute the successful achievement of the aim of this scheme for that individual. The success of this scheme for any individual will be measured by a series of successful work placements, followed by their willingness to remain in the scheme.

It is not the aim of the scheme to place young people in permanent positions. If this occurs, it will be viewed more as an aberration rather than the expected. The nature of today's job market for unskilled or semi-skilled labouring positions is seasonal piecework, short-term or casual positions.

6. Summary

In summary, this pilot project is based on the belief that young Indigenous people from Cape York Peninsula can be placed directly into mainstream employment, provided that they receive effective support and supervision. This includes the establishment of unskilled, seasonal work placements well away from the distractions and interference of family and community.

7. References

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