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Policy  
Research**



**Educational 'failure' and educational  
'success' in an Aboriginal community**

**R.G. Schwab**

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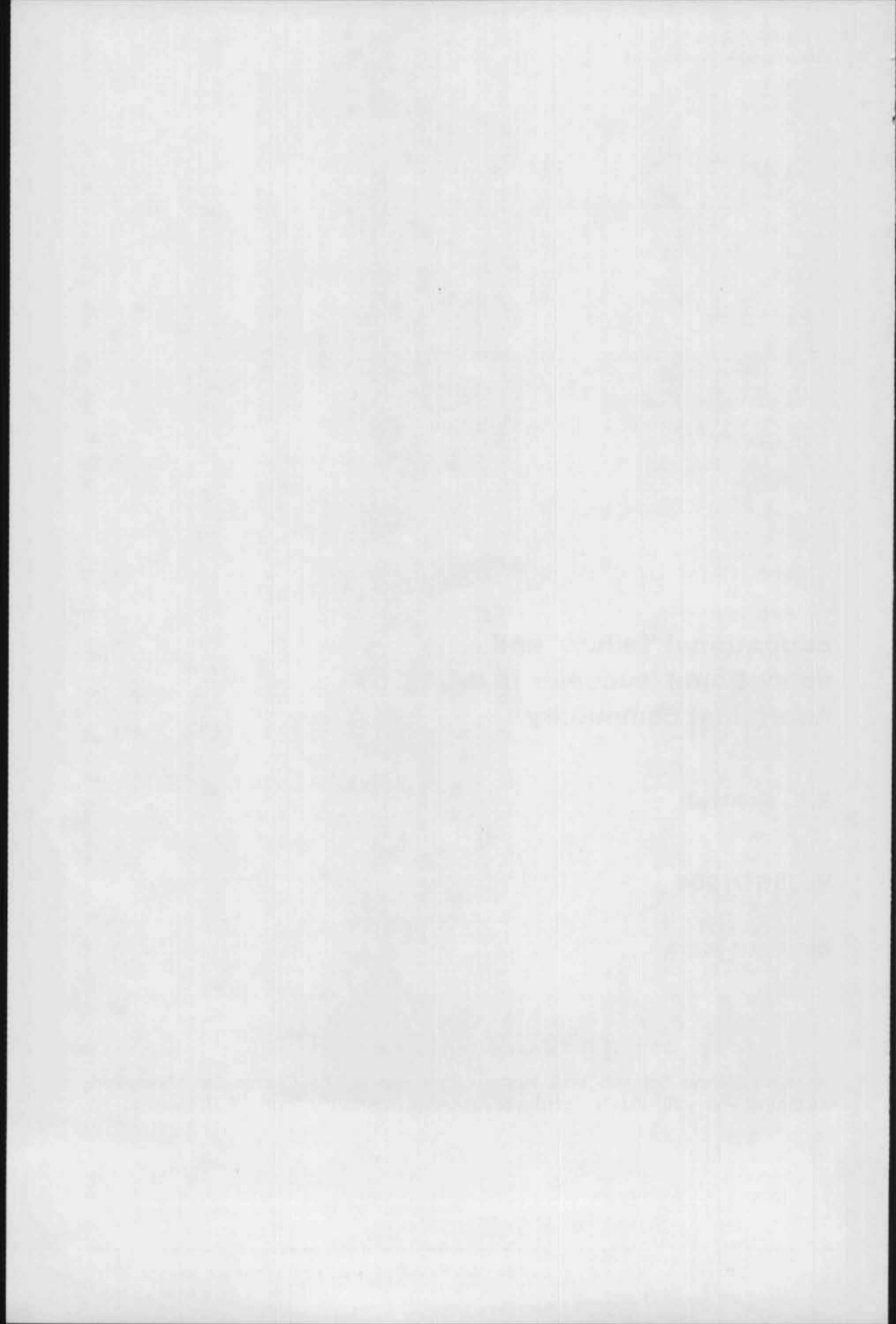
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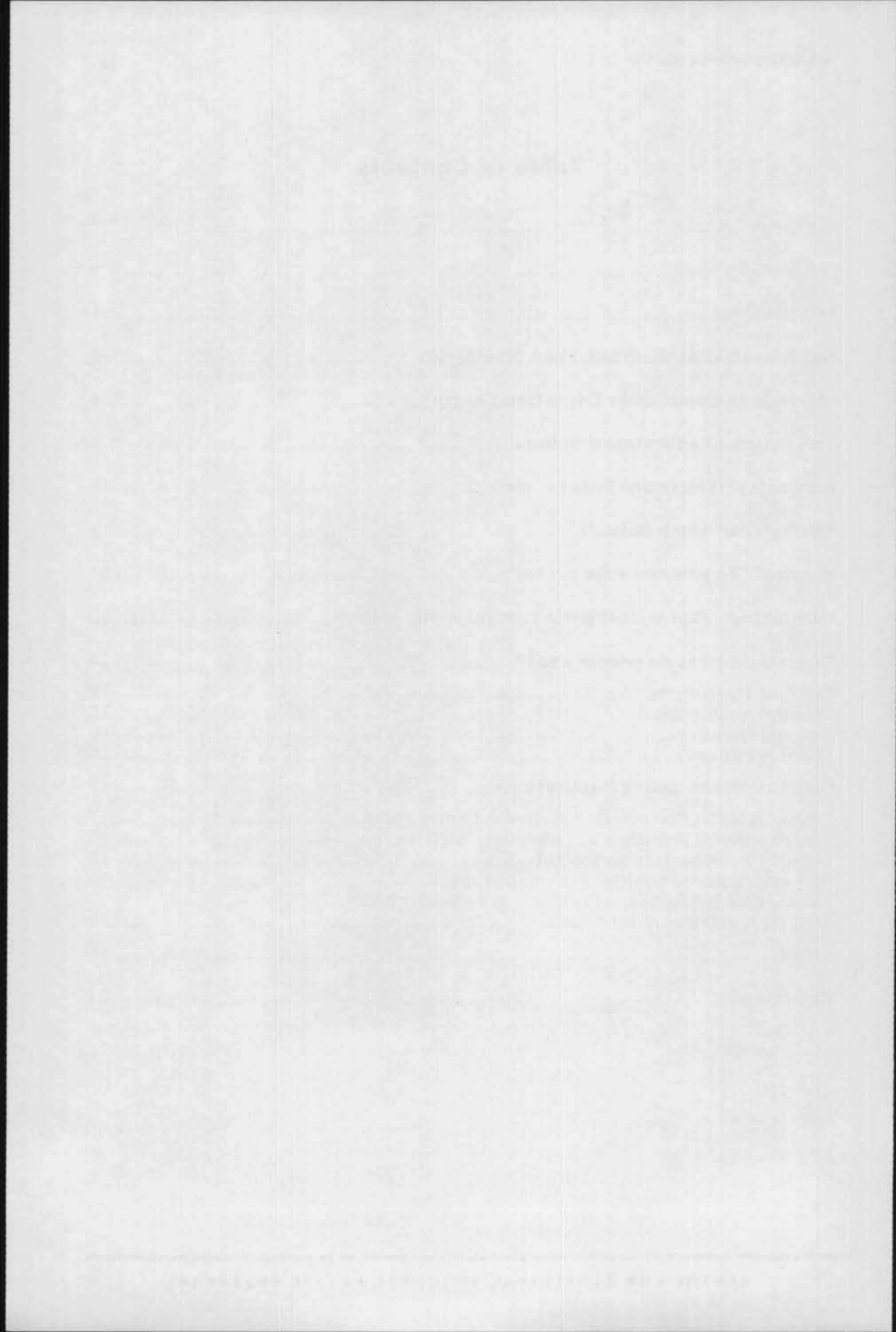
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Dr R.G. (Jerry) Schwab is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Faculty of Arts, The Australian National University.



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## Summary

This paper is an exploration of the interaction of Aboriginal people with the Western system of education in the remote community of Maningrida in north-central Arnhem Land. Maningrida Community Education Centre is a government facility comprising the hub school in Maningrida and 13 homeland centre schools. In August 1997 it employed over 60 staff. The enrolment figures for both the hub school and the homeland centre schools indicated a total of 557 students in August of 1997; only about 12 students are non-Aboriginal. As in many Aboriginal communities, the school is perceived as one of the most significant institutions, yet there is anxiety over the degree to which education is succeeding or failing in Maningrida. The paper argues that Aboriginal people in the Maningrida region hold a far more complex understanding of education than is often assumed. Their participation in education is structured by a range of particular interests and desires. To interpret the interaction of Aboriginal people with educational institutions in terms of failure is to fundamentally misunderstand the social process of education in this community.

### The nature of educational 'failure'

Many of the theoretical approaches to educational 'failure' are problematic in that they are based—to greater or lesser degrees—on the assumption that Aboriginal people are largely reactive rather than active participants in their interaction with Western education. This paper attempts to show that the phenomenon of 'failure' is more powerfully interpretable if the active role of Aboriginal people in the educational system is emphasised, if their intentions, goals and desires are considered as part of the social process of which the school is but one part. It argues that the daily engagement of Aboriginal people in Maningrida with the institutions of Western education is constructed, negotiated, interpreted and enacted through four prominent cultural themes: autonomy, shame, sharing, and care-taking.

### Education: what do people want?

Assessing the success or failure of education in Maningrida or any other Aboriginal community according to traditional performance measures such as student attendance, retention and national performance tests masks some subtle and important successes of education. Aboriginal people value Western education but they interpret and use the school in ways that fit their specific needs and their perceptions of themselves, their community and their relationship to the world outside. From this perspective, Western education has proven highly successful.

Aboriginal people appropriate the aspects of Western education they need to and ignore it when it does not suit them. What they desire of education is quite different from what the Western institution expects. I would argue that what they

want from education can be categorised in four ways: cultural competence, cultural maintenance, material resources and social resources.

### **Policy implications**

Many Aboriginal people, while admitting some degree of ambivalence about Western education, still believe traditional Western outcomes are important. While I have attempted to show that it should not be assumed education is failing, there are several things that could be done in an attempt to increase student participation, retention, community involvement and the like. Specific policy recommendations include the following:

- To resuscitate the Community Education Centre vision;
- promote the coordination of schools and community services;
- develop training programs for school council members;
- devolve responsibility for school year and school day scheduling to school councils; and
- base school funding on numbers of school-age children, not on enrolment or attendance.

In developing policy to address these issues, it is important to keep in mind the aspects of education that Aboriginal people value which are not necessarily the intended outcomes of the Western educational system. Similarly, policy should strive to fit with the, sometimes unexpected, realities of life in indigenous communities.

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## Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the interaction of Aboriginal people and the Western system of education in the remote community of Maningrida in north-central Arnhem Land. Fifty years ago, the indigenous people of this region enjoyed relative isolation from the rest of Australia, but increasingly this is no longer the case. While ceremonial forms and traditional social structures remain largely intact, dramatic economic change has swept through the region and modern technologies such as telephones, fax machines, computers, the internet, video tapes, aeroplanes and four-wheel-drive vehicles have delivered options and pressures never imagined a generation ago. Many of these options present fundamental challenges to the cultural underpinnings of daily life and the indigenous people in the region are currently attempting to negotiate change and provide the best future for themselves and their children. Much of the negotiation is mediated by various institutions introduced by Europeans, and prominent among these is the community school. As in many Aboriginal communities, the school is perceived as one of the most significant institutions, yet there is anxiety over the degree to which education is succeeding or failing in Maningrida.

On any particular school day the streets of Maningrida contain school-age children playing while many of their age-mates are in classrooms. Discussions among staff, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, of how to increase and maintain attendance are endless but it remains a seemingly intractable problem. At the same time, there is continual discomfort with the low and some say declining levels of performance, on the inability of many children to progress beyond (or in some cases even attain) low level literacy and numeracy skills, on the unwillingness of parents to promote attendance, on the government's inadequate provision of secondary or adult education opportunities, and on the school's inability to somehow find solutions to these problems. These concerns are voiced by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers, school administrators, school council members, and community members.

The basis for these concerns is not immediately obvious to the visiting observer. The children appear enthusiastic and the school looks much like other schools in its general levels of productive commotion and activity. The school staff are committed and caring, the building is mostly adequate, innovative approaches to learning are being attempted, the Aboriginalisation of the faculty is under way, and the structures for community consultation are in place. In spite of all this, the feeling of frustration and failure is pervasive. Few children will attend secondary school, few will have literacy or numeracy skills beyond Year 4 levels (or Year 2 levels in the more isolated homeland centres) and practically none of the students can perform at levels that would allow assessment by the Education Department's standard battery of performance tests. Consequently, very few are even tested. There is an extremely high level of concern about education throughout the community and many people, especially non-Aboriginal people, feel something is deeply and frustratingly wrong. That concern is couched in a range of terms such as 'dysfunction', 'decline', and 'failure'. In terms of the needs

of Aboriginal children, families and communities, it is often said that 'education is failing'.

In this paper I will argue that Aboriginal people in the Maningrida region hold a far more complex understanding of education than is often assumed. Their participation in education is structured by a range of particular interests and desires. To interpret the interaction of Aboriginal people with educational institutions in terms of failure is to fundamentally misunderstand the social process of education in this community. The paper begins with a description and historical sketch of the region, followed by a brief depiction of the structure of the school today. Next, the paper explores some of the problems inherent in approaches to failure, arguing that a reactive stance is frequently assumed by students, parents and communities. The paper proposes that education (and what might commonly be perceived as educational 'failure') can only be productively understood in a broad sociocultural context. In an attempt to begin sketching this context, the paper identifies four cultural themes that pervade life in Maningrida and illustrates the way they reflect and reproduce social relations against the backdrop of 'the school'. These themes, I will argue, explain much about the cultural context that underpins educational 'failure', and they also provide insight into what people want and expect from Western education. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ways in which Aboriginal people in Maningrida use Western education as a means to a variety of ends; in this context, 'failure' has little meaning.

## **North-central Arnhem Land and Maningrida**

North-central Arnhem Land contains several major rivers draining a vast stretch of savannah woodlands between the Arnhem Land escarpment and the Arafura Sea. The region is ecologically diverse with eucalyptus forests as well as swamps and mangrove jungles, sand dunes, dense bushland and mud flats. It is subject to the Asiatic monsoon cycle, with distinct wet and dry seasons. The wet season runs from approximately November to March with dramatic storms, floods and occasional cyclones; the dry season extends from May to September.

The region is remote and isolated and extensive contact with European settlers is relatively recent, but interaction with Macassan trepangers may go back as far as the 16th Century (MacKnight 1976). By the beginning of the 19th Century, European explorers entered the region and pastoralists followed in the 1880s. When the government ended Macassan fishing in 1907, Japanese pearlers replaced trepangers and crocodile hunters arrived at about the same time. Mission activity began in the region early this century with the Methodist Overseas Mission at Goulburn Island (1916), Milingimbi (1925) and the Church Missionary Society at Oenpelli (1925). In 1931 the region was incorporated as part of an Aboriginal Reserve under the *Crown Lands Ordinance*; prior to this, the free movement of non-Aboriginal people was restricted under the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918*. During the Second World War, air bases were constructed near

Milingimbi and Yirrkala Mission and opportunities for employment in those areas as well as to the west toward Darwin and Katherine attracted Aboriginal workers from throughout the region.

In the post-war years, these employment opportunities for Aboriginal people decreased dramatically and in 1949 the Native Affairs Branch established a trading post at the mouth of the Liverpool River in an attempt to repatriate Aboriginal people who had migrated to Darwin during the Second World War. Because of a lack of funding and a shortage of staff, the Native Affairs Branch presence was suspended for several years. In 1957 government officers returned (by this time the Native Affairs Branch had been renamed the Welfare Branch) and infrastructure development began in earnest. The original vision for Maningrida was that of a regional centre where indigenous people in the surrounding area could come to trade goods, particularly crocodile skins and indigenous crafts, and receive medical care. The government was unabashedly trying to stem the flow of Aboriginal people to Darwin where most jobs had dried up after the war but people had shown themselves content to remain. To that end, corrugated iron buildings were erected, a reticulated water system installed, vegetable gardens developed and an airstrip constructed. Indigenous labourers were paid one pound per day; in addition, they and their families received three meals a day. The original vision was not of a new town drawing people from the region into a permanent settlement, but that was the outcome. In May 1958 there were 57 Aboriginal people employed in Maningrida and over the course of the previous six months, over 1,000 pounds worth of goods were sold to the trade store by local indigenous producers. By 1960 the population had swelled to 480, representing people from nine different language groups, plus ten non-indigenous administrators and permanent staff. By that time, the settlement included administration buildings, staff accommodation, a hospital and a school (Hiatt 1965: 11-12; Meehan 1982: 19).

One of the most significant changes for the Aboriginal people of Australia was the 1967 Referendum that enabled the Commonwealth to legislate for indigenous Australians in every State and Territory and to count them as citizens for the census. Coincident was a range of other important changes including extension of Social Security benefits, cash wages and eventually, unemployment benefits to Aboriginal people. These new financial resources allowed Aboriginal people greater freedom and were coincidental with a range of political changes at the national level and with increasing movement back to clan lands in north-central Arnhem Land (Altman 1987: 5). These movements partially reversed the pattern of migration to Maningrida that had been underway for 20 years.

Maningrida is now the largest Aboriginal settlement in Arnhem Land and one of the largest in Australia. According to the 1996 Census the Maningrida region today is home to about 1,850 people. Of these, around 1,200 are Aboriginal residents of the town while a further 521 reside in one of between 20 or 30 homeland centres (sometimes referred to as outstations); Maningrida is also home to 112 non-Aboriginal residents. There is a tremendous amount of movement of Aboriginal people between Maningrida township and the homeland centres with

the population of the township swelling significantly during the wet season when access to the homelands is impossible or difficult because of flooding. Maningrida is located on Kunibidji land; there are around 160 members of this language group. The remaining indigenous population, representing about 27 other language groups reside as 'guests' on Kunibidji land. While these guests reside with permission of the traditional owners, that is not to suggest an absence of tensions.

Maningrida is on Aboriginal land and a permit is required to enter the community or pass through Arnhem Land. A single road running from east to west through Arnhem Land provides access to Maningrida but that road is closed during the wet season. Air access is possible year round and is provided by two airlines with daily service. The community has the expected range of services for a population centre of this size: a health clinic, a grocery store, two take-away shops, bakery, community bus, police station, workshop, post office and school. There are three major agencies in Maningrida: the Maningrida Council, which is essentially the town council, the Maningrida Progress Association (MPA) which operates the store, and the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC), which is the homeland community resource centre. The BAC has a range of subsidiary operations related to homeland communities including an arts and craft centre, a brick factory and a women's centre.

Unemployment is high. While there are some opportunities for work, for example with the MPA or the Maningrida Council, and through the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme (sometimes referred to as the 'work for the dole' scheme) there are few long-term positions. Central Arnhem Land, unlike other Aboriginal communities to the East and West, has up to now had few options for enterprise development. Mines and tourism provide employment and development options a few hundred kilometres away, but at the moment there are no such regional development enterprises to provide employment opportunities for significant numbers who may wish to work in Maningrida, much less the homeland centres. When jobs are available, the generally low skill levels of Aboriginal people in the region are a chronic impediment and lack of Aboriginal worker commitment is an ongoing problem.

### **Maningrida Community Education Centre**

Maningrida Community Education Centre (CEC) is a government facility comprising the hub school in Maningrida and 13 homeland centre schools. In August 1997 it had three administrators, a mentor teacher, 16 classroom teachers (including five indigenous teachers) in the main 'hub' school, and five 'visiting' teachers serving 13 homeland centre schools. In addition, there were 12.5 Aboriginal assistant teacher positions in the hub school and 13 Aboriginal homeland centre teachers. There were 15 other individuals working as technicians in the literature production centre, as janitors, cleaners, and office staff.

Classes in the hub school are organised according to level with preschool, primary (to year 7), and post-primary sections. The school has a bilingual program focusing on English and the two most prominent Aboriginal languages spoken in Maningrida: Burarra and Ndjebbana. The preschool is divided into Burarra and Ndjebbana sections. The primary section is divided into three units: Burarra, Ndjebbana and English and the non-English speaking children receive instruction in both English and their home language. By Year 4, emphasis has moved to classroom work based on English. There is no secondary school in Maningrida but post-primary classes are offered in three streams to meet the differing needs of students: general studies, intensive English and manual arts. After Year 7, boys and girls are separated for cultural reasons. Students who wish to study at the secondary level must leave the community or undertake correspondence courses.

The 13 homeland centre schools vary considerably in terms of infrastructure and size, but a single instructional pattern is in place for all the schools. Each school is operated by a homeland teacher, typically a person appointed by the senior traditional owner of the country on which the homeland centre sits. The day-to-day operation of the homeland school is the responsibility of the resident homeland teacher, but the educational program is under the direction of the visiting teacher based in Maningrida. The visiting teacher typically spends one day and night in each of his or her homeland school communities, arriving by four-wheel drive or aeroplane. The visiting teacher delivers materials, provides and models lessons, and helps train the homeland teacher. This modelling and training is particularly important since few of these teachers have had opportunities for formal training and some do not read or write English. The homeland schools are mostly simple structures with open but covered work areas and a locked room for storing school equipment. Some have solar power, a toilet, gas stove and refrigerator, while others have only camping facilities. Enrolments in these schools ranged from as few as eight to as many as 21 students.

The enrolment figures for both the hub school and the homeland centre schools indicated a total of 557 students in August of 1997; of these only about 12 are non-Aboriginal. Attendance over the year fluctuates markedly. Attendance typically rises in the hub school during the wet season as people move from the homeland centres to Maningrida and then falls during the dry season as people disperse and become involved with hunting, gathering and ceremonial activities. School attendance records show an average combined attendance for the hub and homeland centre schools of around 64 per cent, but some weeks the attendance can drop as low as 20 per cent. While enrolment has grown by about 50 or 60 each year, attendance numbers have held steady for the last five years. In general, attendance at the hub and homeland centre schools is roughly equal.

## The nature of educational 'failure'

Anthropologist Ray McDermott has considered school failure and learning disabilities in the United States and he and his colleagues' writings provide a useful lens for exploring educational notions of educational 'failure' in Maningrida ( McDermott 1974, 1987, 1993; McDermott and Varenne 1995). The argument is most fully developed in the context of an analysis of disability, particularly learning disability. McDermott and Varenne (1995) identify three distinct approaches to thinking about educational disability that are translatable to the context of 'failure'.

First, they argue, it is possible to account for failure as a result of deprivation. The foundation of this perspective is the belief that members of groups develop differently enough that they can be shown to be measurably different from other groups in terms of particular developmental milestones. In other words, some people have developed the skills to perform particular tasks, other people haven't and the presence and extent of those skills can be reliably measured. This is essentially a deficit model and explains the failure of minority children in school as a function of impoverished or impoverishing experiences at home (McDermott and Varenne 1995: 334). It is also a model used to explain differences in various types of cognitive or motor tasks as a function of poor nutrition or inadequate ante- or post-natal care and as such has relevance for analyses of educational performance.<sup>1</sup>

The second approach to educational disability (or, in this case, failure) focuses on difference. This perspective assumes that members of particular groups develop knowledge and skills that are well-tuned to the requirements of their cultures. Comparisons of cross-cultural measurements in the performance of tasks employing those skills are thus meaningless or require heavy qualification. While this view goes back to the hey-day of cultural relativism, it does not ignore the implications of cultural contact and interaction. McDermott and Varenne summarise the political implications of this view: 'despite a liberal lament that variation is wonderful, those who cannot show the right skills at the right time in the right format are considered out of the race for the rewards of the wider culture' (McDermott and Varenne 1995: 335). According to this perspective, cultural difference often accounts for school failure: minority children are struggling because they are swimming against the cultural current in a educational system which is foreign and controlled by teachers from the dominant society, and they are forced to perform tasks that reveal their weaknesses.<sup>2</sup>

The third approach begins with an inversion of the traditional view of learning disabilities: the child does not acquire a disability, the disability acquires the child (McDermott and Varenne 1995: 336). I can't do justice in this space to this complex and provocative argument in which the authors refer to the acquisition of a child by a learning disability, but the kernel of that argument is useful for interpreting some of the concerns which manifest under the notion of 'educational failure' in Maningrida. This approach begins with the assumption

that every sociocultural system frames and shapes options, hopes, and aspirations for individuals or groups and provides the criteria for tagging those who succeed and those who fall short. In schools, those tags are particularly powerful in their identification of failure. At best, they provide efficient ways to channel individuals or groups along pathways of remediation, at worst they provide a means to sort the wheat from the chaff. In either case, such individuals or groups are placed in positions and identified as possessing 'particular qualities that symbolise, and thereby constitute, the reality of their position *to others*' (McDermott and Varenne 1995: 336, emphasis in original). In this sense, competence and failure are relative constructions.

Competence is a fabrication, a mock-up and people...work hard to take their place in any hierarchy of competence displays. Being acquired by a position in a culture is difficult and unending work. The most arbitrary tasks can be the measure of individual development. Not only are cultures occasions for disabilities, but they actively organise ways for persons to be disabled (McDermott and Varenne 1995: 337).

Extending this theme from disability to failure, one can argue that failure, like competence, is a fabrication, a construction. Along these lines, one would ask to what degree the educational structures in Maningrida and elsewhere construct opportunities for educational failure: failure by students, teachers, administrators, the Education Department, and the community? In other words, to what degree do individual students, teachers or the community actually fail and to what degree are they acquired by the category 'failure'?

All three of these approaches can usefully be brought to bear on perceptions of educational 'failure' in Maningrida. Yet, they are all problematic in that they are based, to greater or lesser degrees, on the assumption that Aboriginal people are largely reactive rather than active participants in their interaction with Western education. They 'fail' in the Western model because they suffer deficits as a result of a lack of 'appropriate' cultural knowledge or experience or through organic damage suffered as a result of inadequate ante- or post-natal care, or perhaps they 'fail' because they are simply culturally different and, as a result, powerless and unable to 'achieve' in the unfamiliar educational system. The third approach suggests they fail because they are constructed or 'acquired' failures in a rigid educational system that targets a predetermined set of competencies where Aboriginal students almost invariably fall short. This approach is more promising than the first two in acknowledging that individual students sometimes behave strategically and in so doing contribute to the circumstances of their own constructed failure, yet this approach assumes actors are essentially reactive as well.

While each of these approaches has some potential for explaining what is perceived by many as educational 'failure' in Maningrida, the phenomenon of 'failure' is more powerfully interpretable if the active role of Aboriginal people in the educational system is emphasised, if their intentions, goals and desires are considered as part of the social process of which the school is one part. Once the frame is shifted and choice, strategy and action are considered, the school can be

understood, not as a site for predetermined failures, but as a site of active cultural production, where Aboriginal people in Maningrida accommodate, resist and adapt to the Western system and structures of education (Levinson and Holland 1996).

As I will argue below, the daily engagement of Aboriginal people in Maningrida with institutions of Western education is partly constructed, negotiated and enacted through four prominent cultural themes. These themes are not only related to education but emerge repeatedly in the ongoing negotiation of social relations among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the region. Through these themes, social life and Aboriginal notions regarding the nature and purpose of education are structured and interpreted, cast and recast. The recurring social forms and actions in these four themes show Aboriginal people as not only interpreting education in their own cultural context, but steering it toward their own ends. In the next section, I will investigate the four cultural themes: autonomy, shame, sharing, and care-taking.<sup>3</sup>

### **Autonomy: 'You're not boss for me!'**

Personal autonomy frames much of Aboriginal social action. As sentiment, rule, expectation and practice, it is one of the most pervasive and powerful ordering structures in Aboriginal society. Yet Aboriginal notions of personal autonomy conflict deeply with many of the traditional structures of Western education. Assumptions of authority and expectations of procedure are subverted and inverted every day in the school in Maningrida by the enactment of Aboriginal notions of autonomy. Western education is based on the assumption that children will attend school, in fact, it assumes they must attend, but this is an assumption that does not hold up in day-to-day practice. Children, not just teenagers, but early primary students as well, ultimately decide if and when they will attend and with rare exception their choices are supported by the Aboriginal community. From a Western educational perspective this can look absurd. This was illustrated when, following conflict in the school between a child and a teacher, a meeting was held with a parent and all the concerned parties. When the conflict was finally resolved, the non-Aboriginal staff member told the Aboriginal child to return to class, but one of the Aboriginal teachers immediately stepped in and asked the child, 'do you *want* to go back to class?'. In this way, the Aboriginal child's autonomy was affirmed in the face of the authority of the disciplinary structures of the Western educational institution.

Autonomy is fundamental to interaction away from school as well. A Homeland Centre teacher, in discussing the difficulties Aboriginal parents have in telling their children to go to school said:

It's too hard for Aboriginal people. To tell your kids to go to school. Mother and father, to tell kids 'go to school'. And the kids say, 'No! I don't like going to school', they say. 'You're not boss for me!'



Autonomy is a cornerstone of Aboriginal society and that autonomy extends to all individuals, not just adults (Hamilton 1981; Myers 1991; Keffe 1992). In practice, many parents and Aboriginal teachers will speak eloquently of the importance of school for Aboriginal children, but they will not force their children to attend, they will not 'be boss' for their children.<sup>4</sup> For example, one recent day in Maningrida a handful of primary school children were present in the classroom of an Aboriginal teacher while a few blocks away, twice as many children of this age were in that teacher's home, with that teacher's children, watching videos. In effect, children attend when they like, dropping in and out of class on any particular day. Many children seem to view school attendance as a stage where engagement and participation is less important than physical presence. In this way school is much like a stage in initiation, and children who drop out will remark that they have 'done school'.

In principle, the school and teachers have authority to require attendance and restrict the movement of children once in their care, but in practice that authority is an illusion and totally impractical.<sup>5</sup> Thus the cultural theme of autonomy is manifest as the Aboriginal community both asserts its cultural values and resists the assumptions of Western educational structures. Aboriginal people agree, for the most part, that education is valuable, but feel decisions to participate can only be left to the child. It is difficult, however, for Western educators, even those who understand the centrality of autonomy in daily life, to view children who enact that autonomy in choosing not to attend school as not failing within or being failed by the Western educational system.

### **Shame: 'Too much Balanda'**

Another prominent cultural theme is shame. Like autonomy, this is a pervasive theme found in Aboriginal communities across the country. It is a complex concept incorporating notions of embarrassment, shyness and respect and it explains a great deal about Aboriginal comfort, or the lack thereof, with schools. Many, if not most, Aboriginal people in Maningrida are shy and self-conscious around Europeans and school is for some children and adults a foreign and often uncomfortable place. Paradoxically, school is also considered a safe place by some children and community members because it is neutral ground. Yet, coming to school, with its unfamiliar structures of time and space and strange people (both Aboriginal and European), is a difficult decision for many children to make.

One Aboriginal woman described children's resistance to school:

Kids say... 'I don't like going in the school because there's too much Balanda (non-Aboriginal people) watching and we don't like writing words and doing work, hard work for us, going school there teasing each other. Other kids teasing. That's why Aboriginal kids don't like to come in hub school. They stay out in their homeland and stay out there. Just stay out in the bush. Maybe, I think, they are too frightened'.

Children say they don't like to be stared at and they feel out of place in school. They say there are too many non-Aboriginal people and they are teased by other language groups. Sometimes the discomfort is more subtle. One former homeland centre visiting teacher tells of high levels of frustration over the inability to get some children to leave a particular camp and come to school. It turned out that the children had no clothes. Naked school-age children are hardly noticed on the beach or playing in the forests on the edge of town, but they would attract uncomfortable attention in the school in the centre of town. In this way, cultural notions of shame affect children's abilities or willingness to participate in schooling.

Aboriginal children in Maningrida and the surrounding region are obviously not like other Australian school children. There are many other cultural complexities that make schooling challenging, if not problematic. For example, cooperative learning, a model of instruction in which children work together in groups, has been found to be an effective learning strategy in schools across the world, and in fact Aboriginal people themselves have indicated this mode of instruction fits well with their cultural style. But there are times when it doesn't operate smoothly. Many schools will have experienced tensions between children of different ethnic groups who have conflicts outside the school, and that pattern exists in Maningrida where children from different language groups sometimes have difficulty working together. In Maningrida there is the additional problem of kinship systems which restrict or prohibit interaction between different classifications of kin; avoidance relationships can cause great problems both for teachers and students.

Notions of shame and shyness have a powerful impact on children's willingness to attend school but it also affects their degree of participation and engagement. As Myers (1986: 125) has observed in the Central Desert, Aboriginal people protect their autonomy by hiding it, and this pattern appears in Maningrida as well. Children and parents will go out of their way not to bring public attention to themselves, to avoid embarrassment, particularly in interaction with other than close kin. The school is thus a place where one can be easily shamed and Aboriginal people are very careful when structuring interactions in that setting. Deference is shown, avoidance engaged in, and classroom behaviour constrained; facilitating learning against this cultural backdrop is often a challenge for non-Aboriginal teachers. Western educational institutions have grown out of European cultures and for Aboriginal people, school is not merely an intellectual challenge, but a cultural one as well. In many Aboriginal communities, those who cannot meet that challenge are in danger of being sifted out or tagged for remediation. In this way cultural notions of shame can have a powerful affect on children's willingness and ability to participate and learn, on their ability to succeed or fail.

## Sharing: 'We just came for tucker'

Altman (1987) captures some of the complexity of contemporary economics in the Maningrida region when he refers to 'hunter-gatherers in the welfare state'. As he shows, for Aboriginal people there is no escape from the Australian state or the dominant Australian economy. Nonetheless, Aboriginal people in Maningrida as elsewhere operate in many ways according to traditional rules and expectations. The school is prominent in both the formal and informal economy of the region as a source of a variety of goods, services and employment, and broad links of kinship and affiliation are one of the key mechanisms for the distribution of such resources. The obligations of kinship, underpinned by cultural expectations of sharing, cause continual tension in Maningrida in the context of the school as Aboriginal people struggle to balance the demands of kin regarding the sharing of resources with the expectations of the White world.<sup>6</sup>

Demand sharing, the cornerstone of hunter-gatherer economic and social relations is alive and well in Maningrida and has a powerful affect on life in and around the school. Aboriginal teachers, school staff, school council members and even children are subject to the demands of kin. Positions of authority in the White world held by Aboriginal people provide access to resources that, in the Aboriginal community, are expected to be shared; the school is one place where a wide range of resources are available. Thus, food, cash, vehicles, shelter and school supplies are seen to be community resources that should be shared and redistributed. This causes enormous conflict where, for example, the school must account for the use of materials, vehicles, school funds and work time. Where expectations conflict, and the Aboriginal way persists, the Western system breaks down. Such breakdowns, and the subsequent frustration and disruption of the Western system, is seen from the non-Aboriginal view point as a failure; from the Aboriginal perspective it appears as business as usual.

Life in Maningrida is focused on the here and now and there is still a tendency for most Aboriginal people in Maningrida to live a 'feast and famine' lifestyle. When resources are available, whether food, money, alcohol, or any other material good, they are immediately called upon to be shared and consumed. Traditionally there has been little reason to think about tomorrow. There is, some say, no concept of money, it's worth, or the notion of earning, much less investing. Similarly, the notion of education as an investment is not intuitively obvious to many students or parents and results in misunderstandings and frustration on the parts of both school staff and members of the wider Aboriginal community.

Daily life in the region, as in pre-contact time, is shaped largely by the necessity of making a living, and particularly of obtaining food. People can get by through sharing and many would rather buy canned food or fried take-away chicken and chips than hunt or fish; others, who would prefer traditional food, rarely have reliable access to transport or tools such as fishing lines or rifles. In this context, the school canteen, with its carefully restricted menu of wholesome

foods, has become a major food source for much of the community, proven by the fact that it cleared \$100,000 in profits in 1996.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, this has proven to be a significant factor in bringing children to school. In Maningrida, children are always hungry and food from the school canteen and fruit distributed in classrooms has been one way to encourage children to attend school and contribute to a reliable diet. Food, not the allure of learning, is what draws many students to the school.<sup>8</sup> While some school staff find this depressing, and some others worry that food distribution might appear paternalistic, others are more pragmatic and believe that anything that draws children into classrooms is a success.

While some limited employment exists and money comes in to the community through various pensions and unemployment benefits, in the context of daily life, most Aboriginal people are poor. As is well known, poverty does not facilitate learning or parental involvement in schools and Maningrida is no exception to this pattern. In Maningrida, pervasive gambling has a powerful siphoning effect on community cash.<sup>9</sup> Card games run round-the-clock in the community and thousands of dollars change hands on every street and in every part of Maningrida every day of the week. Though some people do not and will not participate, the late nights, noise and social disruption affects adults and children alike. One school staff member remarked on the prevalence of gambling and the impact on children:

When the siren sounds in the morning to call children to school, many are still asleep, unable or uninterested in getting up and going to school. Everybody's exhausted after the night's gambling. Children hang about the games all day and all night, waiting for a family member to 'win' so they can get a \$5 or \$50 note to take to the school canteen for food. Some of these kids you don't see in the classroom, but there they are as soon as the tuckshop opens for morning tea. I asked some boys playing outside the tuckshop, 'Hey, why aren't you kids in class?' and they just laughed and said 'We just came for tucker. We're not here today.'

The continual economic and other demands placed on people and materials associated with the school can distract educators (and children) from what they all perceive to be the core business of the school—to facilitate learning. Similarly, poverty, economic vagaries and the predictable unpredictability of life in the community can be disruptive and frustrating for those educators attempting to work within the boundaries of an institution built upon assumptions of constancy and structure. In this light, it is difficult to see educational success.

### **Caretaking: 'That school gotta recognise *our* policy!'**

Maningrida has always been an artificial community. It has no real economic production base and exists only as a service centre. It is also artificial in that it brings together language groups that would never normally reside together. The Kunibidji are the traditional owners of the land but 27 or so other language groups reside there. The local council is structured to provide representation from

the diverse community, but it is clear that some groups have more power and influence than others. Those differences create and perpetuate tensions in the community. But the more visible power differential is between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the community and while there is much attention paid to fact that Maningrida is an Aboriginal community and White people are the guests, there is no question that a few non-Aboriginal residents wield significant power and influence. Each major organisation, including the school, has a board of governance of some sort, often with a majority of Aboriginal board members, but in many cases the decisions of these boards are shaped by non-Aboriginal people in positions of power. This is not to suggest there is necessarily coercion involved or Aboriginal board members are there in token capacity, though some would argue that is in fact the case in some organisations. Rather, Aboriginal people recognise that the various organisations are their conduits to the White world and no one knows the rules of the White game better than Whites.

Aboriginal people in Maningrida see themselves as caretakers, as 'boss', responsible for the 'country' and their culture, and in recent years they have also come to see themselves as caretaker and as ultimately responsible for the institutions non-Aboriginal people have introduced to their world. The cultural theme of caretaker carried in the conception of 'boss' pervades life in Maningrida and structures many of the key interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Maningrida.<sup>10</sup> As bosses, Aboriginal people retain authority (if not power), over non-Aboriginal institutions and perceive non-Aboriginal people as necessary and useful.

There is a story told in Maningrida of a group of Aboriginal people who travelled to Indonesia on some sort of cultural exchange. The Aboriginal guests observed their hosts and eventually expressed their puzzlement: 'Where are your Balandas (White people)?' The point being that Aboriginal people consider Balandas not just a necessary evil but often extremely useful. As many Aboriginal people are quick to point out, 'The Balandas work for us, we don't work for them'. The idea that the Indonesian people had no Balandas to take care of the things Balandas take care of was incomprehensible.

In Maningrida, as elsewhere in Arnhem Land, there is an increasing movement toward self-determination. This is accompanied by a growing politicisation of Aboriginal people, many of whom are articulate and determined in their search for an appropriate way to contain and control non-Aboriginal people whom they view as guests in their country. This search is tempered by the struggle to find a balance between the costs and benefits of participating in the White world, and Aboriginal people are often vocal in their expressions of frustration. An Aboriginal school council member complained that the school seemed to operate on its own agenda, not an Aboriginal one. 'That school gotta recognise *our* policy,' he said, 'That Principal works for us!' This statement is itself evidence that an 'Aboriginal' policy is indeed emerging.

There is growing Aboriginal input and direction into the operation of the school, and a healthy amount of grumbling and conflict, some public, some

private. Yet the result has been the maintenance of the status quo and there is some open frustration among Aboriginal staff and community members that the school has not moved more quickly toward Aboriginal control. Indeed, the often expressed dream of an Aboriginal controlled, fully Aboriginal-staffed school appears to be a very long way off. Though increasing numbers of Aboriginal people are gaining skills to Aboriginalise the Western education system in Maningrida, that process is extremely slow. Decisions are being made, however, that influence curriculum, staffing and expenditure. The decision-making process has devolved and Aboriginal people are assuming an active role. Though many are content to allow the Balandas to 'do the work', others assert their role of caretaker or 'boss' of the school. But for the present, there is more rhetoric than action. The devolution model emerged from, and has been most successful in, urban schools, where it assumes the members are familiar with and capable of working within the existing educational structures. But there are no Aboriginal architects or lawyers or university graduates on the Maningrida CEC School Council and while there are loud calls for change, few Aboriginal people are comfortable with what is, and to some extent will always be, a foreign system. Yet it is important to look at the larger picture. While some Aboriginal people charge the system has failed to hand over the reins of the school, most are content with their consultative role. While there has been discussion in the past of developing an independent, community controlled school in Maningrida, that initiative has never gained momentum.

### **Education: what do people want?**

It is easy for observers educated in Western schools to look at education in Aboriginal communities such as Maningrida and focus exclusively on the low levels of attendance, non-involvement of parents and low levels of academic performance, but if consideration is given to the cultural themes through which education is approached and enacted, it is possible to see more subtle processes at work. Aboriginal people do value Western education, but they are also interpreting and using the school in ways that fit their specific needs and they are making statements about themselves, their country and their relationship to the world outside. From this perspective, Western education has proven highly successful.

To put this in perspective, it is useful to stop and consider what the Western educational system expects of students and communities. Australian schools, like Western schools everywhere, are typically structured around quite specific expectations of student attendance, parent and community involvement, particular, measurable levels of performance, retention, completion, and appropriate outcomes. Schools seek to nurture if not create particular types of 'educated persons', individuals who are good citizens, productive and competent. But what sort of competence? More than ever before, that answer is clear—economic competence. Schools, we are now told by the government in Australia,

need to produce students who will be self-sufficient, students who have the skills to hold jobs, students who will contribute labour to build Australia's future.

Yet these notions of competence do not fit with the realities of life in a community such as Maningrida. Aboriginal people in that community view education in terms that differ significantly in both content and emphasis from that of mainstream Australia. They are steering education in particular directions, actively addressing some of the central challenges and contradictions of contemporary life. Some of these recur and are continually addressed in the cultural themes of autonomy, shame, sharing and caretaking are woven through daily life in the community and school. These cultural themes reflect and shape perceptions of opportunities, options and choices.

Aboriginal people appropriate some aspects of Western education where they need to and ignore it when it does not suit them. What they desire of education is quite different from what the Western institution expects. I would argue what they want from education can be categorised in four ways: cultural competence, cultural maintenance, material resources and social resources.

### **Cultural competence**

Paradoxically, while most Aboriginal people recognise the value of speaking English and acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, they do not perceive that education is urgently needed to live a fulfilling life; indeed, there is much evidence to the contrary, particularly in the homeland centres. Few Aboriginal people in Maningrida are concerned with economic competence as defined by the Government. While some children and adults say they want education so they can win jobs, most see no reason to work. Jobs are few in the community and the idea of leaving the region to work makes little sense to most since jobs have proven to be largely unnecessary in terms of surviving in the modern welfare state. They do, however, recognise the importance of cultural competence—not competence in Aboriginal culture where they are already competent, but competence in non-Aboriginal culture. People say such competence means understanding the cultural and bureaucratic logic of the non-Aboriginal world, and is necessary for negotiating with the Government, for writing grant proposals, and for understanding how to fill in pension and unemployment benefit applications.<sup>11</sup> The school is one of the key providers of many of the skills that comprise that competence and is therefore considered essential by most. There is no strong perception, however, that everyone needs those skills; if some small number are able, that is sufficient.

### **Cultural maintenance**

The school is potentially a very effective mechanism for cultural maintenance and Aboriginal people recognise that. The bilingual program in the school has resulted in the creation of written versions of two of the local languages, Burarra and Ndjebbana, and there is pressure on the school for

expansion of the program to develop written versions of some of the other languages. There is tremendous pride taken in the fact that Aboriginal languages now exist side-by-side with English. The school also includes some traditional art and craft activities as part of the weekly curriculum. Elders from the community provide instruction in weaving, bark painting, spear-making and the like. The inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge and technologies in the school curriculum provides a powerful visual and practical validation of Aboriginal culture.<sup>12</sup>

### **Material resources**

Aboriginal people in Maningrida recognise that the school provides an important range of material resources for the community. Food, for example, is particularly significant. Hot meals, juice, fruit, soft drinks, sandwiches, icecream, potato chips and a range of other foods are available for sale to the Aboriginal community in the school canteen (often on credit, a situation which has created some tense cross-cultural misunderstandings), and fresh fruit is given to students several times a week as part of a subsidised nutrition program. Food is also distributed during the visits of teachers to the homeland centre schools in remote areas. The school vehicles are loosely controlled and provide transport for many people only peripherally involved with the school.<sup>13</sup> Jobs for many Aboriginal people are provided through the school and the salaries are standardised and match those of non-Aboriginal employees in urban schools. By historical standards, the incomes of Aboriginal individuals employed as teachers, for example, are enormous. The school is thus a vital conduit for material resources in the community.

### **Social resources**

The school provides direct access to a range of important social resources that are otherwise unavailable. Aboriginal children, like many children in other Western style schools, often complain that daily life is boring, and the entertainment value of the school is high. Music, art, books, computers, sports and excursions provide stimulation and excitement. The school also facilitates special children's health programs such as hearing testing and dental checks. School staff also represent useful allies for interacting with the White world, and often provide assistance with forms and advice and cultural translation related to the non-Aboriginal world. In some instances, school staff have been called upon to assist in mediating disputes between Aboriginal people.<sup>14</sup> The school is thus an important venue for securing a variety of social resources for the wider community.

### **Conclusion and policy implications**

In the Maningrida region today, education is conceived of by Aboriginal people in terms of equity, as a fundamental right of Australian citizenship won in exchange



for allowing non-Aboriginal people onto their traditional lands and into their world. There is an ever increasing insistence by Aboriginal people on a major role in steering education in their own communities, an insistence often articulated in the context of their responsibilities as owners of their culture, caretakers for the country and ultimately for the institutions non-Aboriginal people established in the region. Assessing the success or failure of education in Maningrida or any other Aboriginal community according to traditional performance measures such as student attendance, retention and national performance tests masks some subtle and important successes of education. Western education in general, and the Maningrida CEC in particular, is facilitating the acquisition of basic competencies in literacy and numeracy skills for those who want it, and providing the requisite skills for those who choose to participate directly in the dominant economy. It is also serving as a vital economic and social resource for the people in the region, sometimes in ways that are not immediately observable or obvious. These are all important and valuable outcomes in themselves but there are many Aboriginal people who, while admitting to some feeling of ambivalence about Western education, still believe traditional Western outcomes are important. While, as I have attempted to show, one should not assume education is failing, there are several things that could be done in an attempt to increase student participation, retention, community involvement and the like.

### **Resuscitate the Community Education Centre vision**

Education is not simply a 'good' brought in from outside, delivered through an institution that stands outside the community, but it is very easy for Aboriginal people to perceive it as such. Though they are typically situated in the centre of town, schools are often a fenced island and while parents and community members are often told they are welcome, it can be a foreign and uncomfortable place. As I have attempted to show, the Maningrida CEC is much more than a cluster of classrooms where children are sent to learn. It is in many ways the centre of the community. The CEC model was envisaged as a way to draw the community into the school and for the school to extend itself to the community. As the name suggests, the focus is on education for the community, not just children. Though the Maningrida school is still referred to as the CEC, it is so in name only. Yet the principle is a sound one, that makes sense in the context of Aboriginal communities like Maningrida, and there could be enormous benefits in resuscitating the CEC vision.

Aboriginal people in Maningrida look to the school to meet many community needs, and it seems sensible for policy makers to attempt to build upon this expectation as a mechanism for enhancing educational outcomes. For example, a true CEC would bring adult education into the school. While the questions of location, curriculum, and scheduling would need to be worked out by members of the Maningrida community, bringing community education into the CEC could make the transition for older students who are unwilling or unable to leave the community for secondary or post-secondary education much easier. In addition, a shift to a community education model could have powerful symbolic value

illustrating and displaying the normality of lifelong learning; there is particular power in enabling children to observe adults involved with learning.

If adult education is to be successfully interlinked with school, it will need to be supported through funding permanent classroom and office facilities and a permanent adult education coordinator. Given the new competitive arrangements requiring bids and facilitation of courses with private providers, it is necessary that a full-time resource person is available to coordinate both the enormous managerial tasks and the courses themselves.

### **Coordination of schools and community services**

A CEC model provides a significant opportunity to bring various child and family-related social services into the school. Policy makers may wish to reconsider the ways in which a range of community services have traditionally been delivered, and explore ways to coordinate and integrate such services with education services. In this way it may be possible to develop closer links between the school and other agencies or organisations serving children and families (for example, health and social welfare). The physical co-location of services and schooling would bring more parents and family members into contact with the school, increasing the sense of community ownership and potentially helping to lower barriers to attendance by increasing community familiarity with the CEC.

### **Training for school council members**

It is one thing to facilitate the representation of indigenous community members on school councils, it is quite another for those members to work effectively within the structures of such bodies. There are heavy demands on indigenous people with skills and confidence to serve on various management and advisory committees, and communities would benefit from formal programs to build the skills of existing and potential council members. This is particularly true in current climate where more and more responsibility is being devolved to school councils.

### **Give communities control over school time**

One thing that is immediately apparent in the Maningrida CEC is that the school day, week and instructional year is a legacy of schedules that have nothing to do with the rhythm of life in that community. The school is closed during the Christmas break, a time that coincides with the wet season, a period of the year where the population of Maningrida swells as movement in the region is constrained by flooding. This would be an ideal time to draw children and community members to the school, but the doors are locked and staff dispersed; in contrast, during the height of the dry season, when attendance drops as families travel to hunt and children participate in ceremonial activities, school is in session. While there are formidable barriers of tradition and expectation, not the least of which are staff expectations, individual communities should be

encouraged and given the flexibility and financial support to experiment with alternative schedulings of the school year. Similarly, individual school councils should be encouraged and supported if they wish to alter the structure of the school week or school day in order to attract more children to the school. If creative and flexible scheduling is supported, individual communities could customise school time to fit the needs of their members and increase student attendance.

### **Base school funding on numbers of school-age children, not on enrolment or attendance**

School funding is currently based on enrolment and attendance. This is a formula that has long historical precedent but does not fit well with the realities of Aboriginal communities. In a remote communities like Maningrida, the local population has a large segment that is highly mobile, and there are dramatic seasonal and ceremonial fluctuations in attendance and enrolment. If staffing and supply levels are funded based on enrolment during one period of time when many students were temporarily away, schools can find themselves seriously understaffed when students flood back in the doors. Funding should be based on the numbers of school-age children in the catchment area. This allows for realistic planning and the flexibility required to deal with sudden shifts and changes in enrolment patterns.

In developing policy to address these and other educational issues, it is important to keep in mind the aspects Aboriginal people value about education, many of which are not necessarily the intended outcomes of the Western educational system. Similarly, policy should strive to fit with the realities, sometimes unexpected, of life in indigenous communities.

### **Notes**

1. Deficit models of educational failure may be having a renaissance in Australia with the arrival of a political agenda that seeks to place responsibility on individuals and promotes an ideology that decries 'special treatment' for disadvantaged minorities.
2. Until relatively recently, much of Australia's educational policy relating to Aboriginal and other minority children was based on this interpretation. The answer to the dilemma of school 'failure', as suggested in countless reports by indigenous education consultative and policy review committees, is contained in a set of recurring policy recommendations promoting increased indigenous involvement in decision-making, increased access and participation, and equitable outcomes (Aboriginal Consultative Group 1975; Commonwealth of Australia 1995; Hughes 1988; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 1996). The catchphrase cure is empowerment—if Aboriginal people are employed, so the argument goes, they will succeed.
3. The approach I am taking here is influenced by Ortner's notion of cultural schemas (Ortner 1989, 1990). More recently she has referred to these as 'serious games', highlighting their strategic character (Ortner 1996). Cultural themes, as I am

referring to them here, are essentially recurring cultural scripts that weave through daily life and order and structure every day interactions.

4. Altman (pers. comm.) suggests that one reason Aboriginal parents are reluctant to 'boss' their children is that children are quick to leave in anger. Because kinship is classificatory, children are never at a loss for other 'mothers' or 'fathers' to provide shelter and support; if they are frustrated or angry, they merely go off to stay with another 'parent'
5. The non-Aboriginal teachers are increasingly aware of the nightmarish legal implications of this situation for 'duty of care'.
6. The principles of Aboriginal sharing are discussed in detail in Schwab (1995).
7. The community has recently requested an extension of open hours beyond the morning and lunch service, and a school breakfast program is being trialled.
8. A recent health screening of school children by the Community Child Health Team found 13 per cent of the children underweight (weight for age), 12 per cent wasting (weight for height), 8 per cent stunted and 10 per cent malnourished. Of those children attending school on the day of the screening, 40 per cent were anaemic, 12 per cent had perforated eardrums and 44 per cent had skin sores, scabies or fungal infections.
9. While it is often said that 'winnings' are redistributed among community members, not all Aboriginal observers are so sanguine. Many note that with the advent of daily air service to Darwin, it is relatively easy for winnings to disappear quickly from the community, never to be seen again.
10. The notion of 'boss' is multifaceted and has its roots in the ceremonial structures of the region where one group 'owns' and has ultimate responsibility for a particular ceremony while a second group of ritual 'managers' attends to the details (cf Berndt and Berndt 1970; Altman 1987). The owner/manager ritual moiety structure is common to many Aboriginal groups (see Strehlow 1947; Meggit 1962 and Myers 1991 for discussion of this pattern in Central Australia). There is possibly also some connection to historical experience with hierarchies in the pastoral industries where one man assumed a directorial role over others.
11. Indeed, some people in the region believe that education involves the revelation of the Balanda 'secret language' and with that language, Aboriginal people will gain access to all the material wealth enjoyed by non-Aboriginal people.
12. While most desire the school to play a role in cultural maintenance, there are exceptions. There are Aboriginal people in the region, living in remote homeland centres, who firmly believe that one day the non-Aboriginal visitors will pack up and move away.
13. Of the seven school vehicles, four belong to the Northern Territory Education Department and three belong to the school council.
14. In one case two brothers had a violent confrontation at the homeland centre where they both lived with their wives, children and other relatives. To calm the situation, one brother moved his family to a neighbouring centre. At a school council meeting, he asked the council for assistance in resolving the dispute so he could move back to his own 'country'.

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