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'You got any Truck?' Vehicles and decentralised mobile service-provision in remote Indigenous Australia

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANU	The Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
NARU	North Australia Research Unit
NIELNS	National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Service provision in remote Indigenous Australia is highly dependent on vehicle availability and profoundly affected by usage constraints. This paper seeks to explore elements of conflict and points of alignment in the intercultural exchange between service providers and those Indigenous people dependent on vehicles for service provision. Drawing on the example of education provision to remote homelands in the Arnhem Land area of the Northern Territory, as well as existing literature of ownership and exchange in Indigenous Australia, the paper outlines a re-alignment of service provision using a decentralised, mobile model of delivery. Based on these case studies, the paper proposes a rethinking of the importance of transport in program implementation and the resulting outcomes, and the relationship between this and Indigenous lifestyle and cultural imperatives. This paper is based on extensive experience in Indigenous education and policy, the bulk of this living and working with the Kuninjku, Djinang, Burarra, Kune and Rembarrnga peoples in the homelands surrounding Maningrida in Arnhem Land.

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Picture a place where the intercultural and intracultural domains are dominated by an ever present question—often unspoken, sometimes coyly whispered, occasionally screamed—'You got any Truck?' This is a place where the Toyota is King, having stamped its iconic presence across the vast tracts of the North, maintaining a simultaneous, and often paradoxical representation of modernity and Indigenous self expression. A place where the word 'truck' evokes expressions of autonomy, notions of collectivity, intercultural frustration and seemingly random acts of extreme violence (Gerard 1989; Holcombe 1998; Myers 1988; Young 2002). One such place is the 10,000 square kilometres surrounding the Arnhem township of Maningrida where, during the 1970s and 1980s, the homelands movement saw people return to country and reassert a distinctly Indigenous lifestyle driven by the intrinsic socio-cultural imperatives of caring for country and spiritual obligation (Bond 1983). Thirty-odd homelands were established across a section of the continent characterised by a rich and diverse environment. In the west, the imposing Arnhem escarpment is cut into deep gorges by the upper reaches of the Liverpool and Tomkinson Rivers, while in the east, the Blyth River estuary is lined by jungle, paper bark and flood plains. In between there are vast tracts of open savannah, punctuated by deep, clear billabongs which in the wet season flow down to mangrove forests where mud, mosquitoes and the crocodile rein supreme. This is where, in terms of 'Muticar' business, the Toyota Landcruiser is the undisputed 'Boss'.[1]

One such boss in this country was the irrepressible Truck Five.[2] Truck Five was one of a fleet of school troop carriers whose task was to service the remote Homeland Learning Centres, ferrying a raft of people, animals and materials through swollen river crossings, across endless quagmires masquerading as roads and along tight, tree lined tracks where, for the uninitiated, wing mirrors are a constant casualty. Truck Five's passengers included artists, weavers, teachers, kids, dogs, turtles, crabs, the odd angry magpie goose and, on one occasion, a young buffalo named Gela Boy. Included in its highly variable cargo was a plethora of teaching paraphernalia, generators, paintings, mail, ammunition, flour tins, a tonne of red dirt, and half-eaten flora and fauna of every possible description. As a consequence, Truck Five was not noted for its aesthetic or aromatic qualities. Similarly, Truck Five's external traits were hardly endearing. A faded brown paint covered panels marred by dints, dingles and graffiti carved by creative kids, while at its front hung an ill fitting bull-bar that jutted out on a menacing angle, daring anything to get in its way. Adorning this sat an ugly black winch that only ever failed to work when you were bogged and whose cable was a tangled mess of steel spikes. Mechanically, however, Truck Five was fine apart from a propensity to go into an uncontrolled death wobble at high speed, and the need for a new starter motor every five days in the wet season.

Despite these shortcomings, and perhaps because of them, Truck Five was a much loved and central feature of life in the Burarra and Djinang homelands lining the eastern side of the Blyth River. Its arrival at the start of the working week was usually heralded with loud shouts of 'school truck', a frenzy of excited kids and, invariably, a massive dog fight across the camp as the honour for the first leg lift on the wheels was hotly contested. The explanation for this excitement was, in part, that Truck Five represented an opportunity to engage in the distinct otherness of *balanda*[3] culture. The visiting teacher was one of the few whitefellas students knew on a personal level, while the truck proffered the promise of entertainment in the form of videos, coloured pencils, paints, story books and the assorted tools of the teaching trade that perhaps children in other areas take more for granted. To the adults, the truck was literally the intercultural vehicle through which this distinctly Indigenous domain did business with the main township. It brought supplies of food from family in town, mail, medical supplies from the clinic, various forms of cheques and payments and a constant stream of *djurra*[4] that needed attention. This was particularly so prior to the introduction of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) truck saving

scheme when an outstation vehicle was a particularly rare commodity.[5] However, the importance of a vehicle such as Truck Five in service provision, and particularly in education delivery, goes far beyond these practicalities. It is this importance, and its relation to current policy, that forms the central tenet of this paper.

In 'Burning the truck, holding the country', Fred Myers (1988) noted that Pintupi social organisation is in fact a transaction in shared identity (see also Gerard 1989; Kolig 1981). It is precisely this, which Myers (1988: 53) proposes is a 'basic issue at all levels', which makes a vehicle such as Truck Five so interesting. The creation of opportunities for such transactions is of paramount importance as evidenced in formal ceremonial situations as well as in the daily interactions of 'demand sharing' around kin based obligation (Altman 1987; Hiatt 1965; Keen 1997; Meehan 1982). These more or less formal interactions provide opportunity for the affirmation of shared identities and differences. Such transactions now extend beyond Aboriginal people to include non-Indigenous service providers and a range of intercultural agencies. Myers proposes that property, such as a truck, be viewed as a sign which represents an opportunity to convert values of the larger exchange system into labour or political support. In the interaction that occurs in a school truck, the vehicle becomes the focus of transaction that involves both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. The vehicle thus provides opportunity for transactions that transcend a localised social reproduction to form new or expanded shared identities (Lawrence 1990; Smith 2000).

However, these transactions can be problematic. Conflict over vehicle use is always possible, and such conflicts can occasionally turn violent (Gerard 1989; Young 2002). This was the case when Truck Five became the focus of a dispute between a service provider and a group of outstation residents.

The carrying of firearms in a school vehicle is prohibited by the Education Department. While this may seem to be fairly straight-forward, firearms (usually shotguns or .308s) are a part of daily life in the outstations (Altman 2003; Young 2002). Their use for the hunting of food makes them an everyday tool, and as such the people in the outstations would often throw a gun in a vehicle as a farmer might a shovel. The rules prohibiting the carriage of firearms in school vehicles caused considerable tensions for teachers and residents, as they drastically reduced the ability of the school truck to contribute to subsistence production. Also, as Aboriginal children grow up around firearms, and are often very well trained in their use, the presence of guns around children is not seen as problematic by local Aboriginal people. As a consequence, many outstation members saw the rule as quite ridiculous.

One morning in an outstation food was critically low, the need for a hunting expedition was high and Truck Five was the only vehicle available. The female teacher, who had many years experience teaching in the outstations, hastily prepared a school program to deliver at the hunting spot and all was well. When they were preparing to leave, however, three men approached Truck Five carrying an assortment of firearms and the teacher immediately reminded them that guns were prohibited in the vehicle. The men quickly explained that as it was goose season the guns were necessary and that if they didn't take them the whole community could go hungry. The teacher responded by saying that she understood, but that if she complied she might lose her job, or that if there was an accident she might go to jail. The men became agitated and crowded around the teacher's window as she sat in the truck. The exchange became increasingly heated until two of the men loaded their firearms. At this point the landowner came over and tried to intervene on the teacher's behalf, however, when threatened he quickly changed his position and insisted that the hunting trip take place. Fearful of what might happen if she didn't give in, the teacher capitulated and the hunting trip was undertaken as per the men's demands (pers. comm., 1 May 2005).

Fig. 1. On the 'highway' to Maningrida, dry season, 2004

Photo courtesy of Tegan Molony.

Mostly, though, conflicts of this kind remain the exception rather than the rule. The school vehicle could usually be separated from conflicts embedded in ownership that plague private and community vehicle use, such as described by Myers (1988), Gerard (1989) and Holcombe (1998). This is because the school trucks were seen as being owned by some one or some thing called 'government', who was disconnected from local social organisation. Also, school trucks were very much *balanda* controlled because one had to be a departmental employee in order to drive one. This does not mean, however, that local Aboriginal people did not exert some forms of claim over a vehicle that serviced them, nor that 'truck humbug' was not a daily part of life. However, most issues were dissociated from conflicts over ownership and were instead embedded in usage constraints. Some other examples of this include not being able to drive at night and only being able to carry a certain number of passengers. Generally, though, the associated rules governing a school truck's use were respected by all parties, to a lesser or greater degree. To not do so risked the loss of the resource or employment or, more importantly, a loss of opportunity to share in the benefits of the wider social field made possible through vehicle use.

This wider social field is first and foremost intercultural (Martin 2001; Merlan 1998). It is seated at once in the shared social identity of the local Indigenous world and in the shared identities of the rest of Australia. For a teacher in the outstations, the realities of this mean being able to transcend one's otherness to an acceptance as a part of the localised social organisation, while simultaneously maintaining a firm presence within the normative frameworks of being an educator (Reynolds & Skilbeck 1976). However, to do this there needs to be a preparedness to engage in, and develop understandings of, the local social organisation. This depends on the creation of a space and a reason for the teacher to become part of this organisation. This is exactly what Truck Five so readily provided.

In the same vein, Truck Five created a space and reason for community members to engage with the *balanda* world and indeed with whitefella education. Although, like all parents, members of the outstations wished the best for their children, the school truck provided an immediate reason to encourage participation in an education that at times must have seemed somewhat pointless (Schwab 1998). While the practicalities of having access to a school vehicle (as outlined in the introduction) are obvious, the benefits of a vehicle like Truck Five extended further to fulfil notions of autonomy, mobility and the maintenance of connections to country and relations (Beckett 1965; Gerard 1989; Holcombe 1998; Kolig 1981; Myers 1988; Peterson 2000; Smith 2000). Importantly, the vehicle also formed a key role in the hybrid economy (Altman 2005) of the outstation through facilitating hunting trips each afternoon which were part of a unique educative model. Furthermore, because the truck was seen as associated with particular Indigenous groups of people, this reaffirmed notions of shared identity, particularly for the students. This would be expressed through comments such as, 'Truck Five number one for us mob' or, 'This one truck for all the Djinang mob'.

While these two perspectives provide the reasons for intercultural exchange and transaction that can occur through a school vehicle, they are primarily connected by externalities. To fully realise the potential of such transaction it is necessary to examine the internal space within which the transaction occurs. In this case it is the battered and dirty interior of Truck Five. To do so the space and transaction within the truck should be seen as an 'intertextual event' where readings of land, people, speech, song and, most importantly, relationships are formed and reformed. The term 'event' is used to convey the immediacy and excitement surrounding a trip in the school vehicle as well as the coming together of people around a common cause with a set of special themes.

The term 'intertextual'[6] is invoked to recognise the importance of context, while simultaneously drawing on critical literacy theories of intertextualities to posit land, people and communication as texts to be read and learned in their own right. This also connotes notions of change in context that are reconstituted to provide new and dynamic readings.

Historical and social determinants are themselves signifying practices which transform and inflect literary practices. Moreover, a text is constituted, strictly speaking, only in the moment of its reading. Thus the reader's own previous readings, experiences and position within the cultural formation also form crucial intertexts (Keep 2000).

These new readings are borne out in the way parents, elders and students interact within a school truck, both with each other and with the *balanda* teacher. Exchanges of bilingual meaning about country and space, for example, are interspersed with songs steeped in western culture, such as *The wheels on the truck go round and round*, which might be immediately followed by Indigenous children's songs such as *Mundergerning Manakay* (crocodile song). Similarly, status and position within the local social organisation is reaffirmed through proximic relations within the truck, most notably by the fact that a landowner would sit in the front, with little kids relegated to being hard pressed against the back doors (see Young 2002). At the same time, however, these relations would

be recontextualised by the presence of the *balanda* teacher, in this case myself, who was usually driving. This immediately had the effect of setting the dominant discourse as an intertextual event, because the conversation between the landowner and myself was by nature necessarily bilingual, as well as switching between verbal and nonverbal text for communication.

A good example of this is a particular landowner from one of the outstations who, during daily afternoon trips would sing the *Manakay*[7] for the particular piece of country we were travelling through. As he did so he would explain to me nature of the *Manakay* and its relation to country in a mix of language and English. This would then be interpreted for me by an Indigenous teacher, who in turn would relay my questions back to the landowner. At the same time, younger students would mimic the *Manakay*, and then be tested on meaning by the landowner. The testing process would then be reconstituted into English again, and the process would continue until all in the truck had at least a rudimentary understanding of the relation of the *Manakay* to country. The next morning such experiences would form the basis of initial journal writing exercises, and as such be reformed into a written text; a mainstay of the wider world's communication and social organisation.

The outstation teaching team recognised these intertextual events as major learning opportunities. Time spent in the truck, at hunting camps and funerals or ceremony, all of which was considerable, increasingly became part of the formal learning program (Fogarty & Keane 2003). Underpinning this was a belief that literacy and numeracy acquisition was not trapped within the domain of the classroom. Developing a praxis that is at once relevant in a local context and transportable to and through other contexts, must begin within the sphere of the known and move to the unknown, then back again. In Indigenous education, this process has been seen as a transaction called 'two way' or 'both way' learning (Christie 1985; Harris 1990). One of the key challenges in remote outstation education is to find points of relevance or synergies and then place them within the educative process. The space inside Truck Five and the places the truck went supplied these points of relevance. Thus the two way transaction was based on real events. These transactions were then used to frame learning programs that were designed to capture the moment, or event, and use this as a basis for literacy and numeracy acquisition. In turn, this required the development of innovative teaching techniques and programs that did not rely on traditional classroom situations, infrastructure or excessive materials. As a result, literacy and numeracy programs developed that were easily portable, highly adaptive and completely mobile.

Some of the more innovative examples of this included the use of digital cameras and video to create instant, group-negotiated texts, and the composition of narratives that were then transferred to giant posters and stapled to trees. Students and community members would then read the texts page by page, like signs, as they travelled the roads and tracks in Truck Five or private vehicles. The important point here is that the pedagogic framework within which the teaching and learning cycle operated was no longer dependant on students attending a fixed school location, or upon Indigenous people curtailing their customary and cultural pursuits so children could attend school. It was, however, totally dependent on having access to a school truck. In this way teaching on floodplains, river banks and under trees became de rigueur as Truck Five followed the movements of the people it serviced. Consequently, a new synergy between education and local Indigenous people was able to emerge, courtesy of the Toyota.

Although this cultural fit had its inceptions in the space within vehicles such as Truck Five, its applicability to the wider field of remote Indigenous education and service provision would, perhaps, remain minimal and highly localised were it not coupled with a contemporary policy discourse that sees poor attendance as a root cause for the 'failure' of remote Indigenous education. The following section of this paper describes how the development

of a mobile teaching program, such as the one outlined above, can be placed within the current policy context to create a strong case for a decentralised, mobile model of delivery in remote communities.

Delivering an education service to outstations in Arnhem Land poses enormous logistical difficulties during the wet season. Typically the area receives three metres of rain between January and March, making unsealed tracks and river crossings impassable for the first school term of each year. During this period many residents of the Homelands move into Maningrida, and student numbers in the outstations fall dramatically. Despite this, visiting teachers endeavoured to provide a service, flying in to schools where possible and driving or walking through difficult conditions to keep schools running. This problem, when coupled with a wider policy imperative saw the development of a new role for Truck Five.

Poor attendance is endemic in the remote Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory (Collins 1999), with many of the communities in the top end averaging only 50 per cent attendance.[8] The reasons for this are complex and space limits here prohibit further discussion. Suffice to say that if education is to play a role in the future prospects for Indigenous people, this dire situation must be rectified.

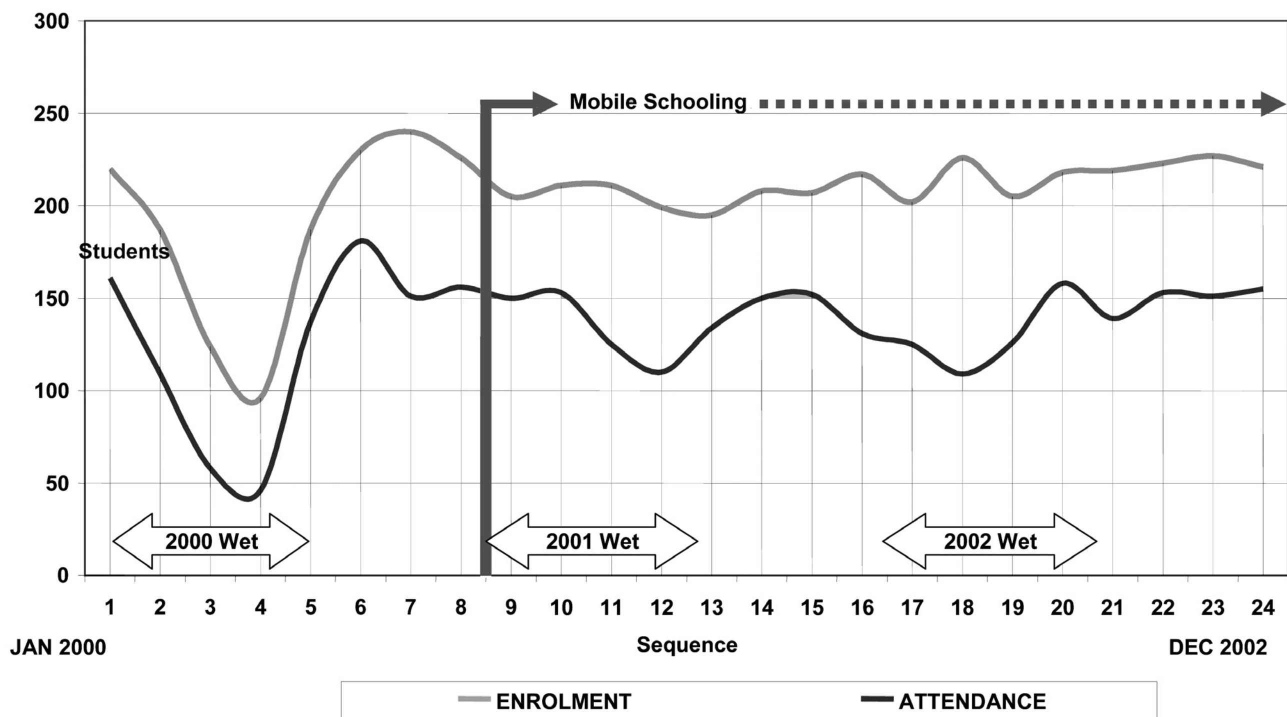
In response to this situation, educational programs for Indigenous students in the Territory, and other States, have had a heavy emphasis on improving attendance outcomes and much of the Commonwealth monies provided through the Department of Education, Science and Training have been directed at gaining improvements in this area. Prior to the release of the Learning Lessons review undertaken by the Hon Bob Collins (Northern Territory Department of Education 1999), which bemoaned a chronic lack of data in Indigenous education, attendance data was unreliable. However, since 2000 a concerted effort has been made in many schools, and in the outstation program at Maningrida, to improve the accuracy and reliability of the data collected.

The resulting improvements in data[9] allowed for closer analysis of attendance issues for the first time. Previously, the outstation section of the school was aware from observation that during the wet season enrolment and attendance of students dropped markedly. However, reliable Enrolment Attendance Returns had not previously been plotted and analysed. In 2000 the collated data, which indicated a massive drop in attendance during the wet season, was examined with a view to developing an education program to combat wet season attendance problems.

Outstation students do not generally attend the main school in Maningrida (see Schwab 2002) and a new mode of delivery within the township needed to be developed specifically to cater for this group. The process of developing a new model depended heavily on the involvement and commitment of the communities affected. Each language group from the outstations group chose a location deemed appropriate around the town as a venue for a wet season schooling program, and teachers set about developing programs that could be delivered to a large group of students with minimal resources outside a classroom environment. This is where the earlier lessons learned in developing mobile education programs and the use of intertextualities became invaluable. In some parts of the town this meant school was held on a tarpaulin under a tree, while in others existing tin structures provided a venue. Much community discussion was entered into about location and the final decisions were made without non-Indigenous input.

Of course, the ability to do this depended entirely on the availability of vehicles as, in effect, the vehicles became mobile classrooms. Truck Five would be packed in the morning with the necessities for the teaching day and teachers, students and materials would be dropped off at up to eight different locations around the town. The versatility of the truck also meant that if students moved back out bush, the truck and the education program could simply follow. In this way a school vehicle such as Truck Five was the catalyst in engaging students both on country and in town.

Fig. 2. Enrolment and attendance for all Maningrida Homeland Learning Centres, 2000–2002



Adapted from Fogarty & Keane (2003).

The attendance results of this model of education are shown in Figure 2. The 2001 results represent a 60 per cent increase, in real terms, in attendance on corresponding 2000 figures. This rise is maintained in 2002.

It is clear that this program had been successful in terms of increasing attendance, and large numbers of students who had previously missed out on school for the whole of first term were now participating and experiencing a marked increase in continuity of their schooling. Also of interest was the number of students who permanently reside in Maningrida who chose to access the mobile program rather than attend the main school. This is not reflected in the data because their attendance at the mobile program was recorded against figures for the main school, but the numbers were significant. In fact, the attendance by students who usually reside in Maningrida was so high that outstation teachers had to turn them away. Eventually, the main school in Maningrida was forced to start a mobile program to cater for these students. Importantly, this model also allowed for a daily re-creation of the intertextual events described earlier in relation to Truck Five. Parents and community members were able to participate fully in the model, often sitting among the painting or weaving students, and helping students while the formal literacy and numeracy activities went on around them. This model and interaction corresponds well with notions of Indigenous learning communities as proposed by Schwab and Sutherland (2003). While this model, and the corresponding data, is in no way being offered as definitive research or as a panacea to the endemic attendance problem, it is included here as an example and a platform for discussion which might explore the possibilities of mobile service provision.

In one way, the idea of decentralising at least part of the education service for students in remote areas is a matter of common sense. If the students won't or don't go to the school, bring school to the students. Of course the realities of this are constrained by a multiplicity of political and bureaucratic impediments, while normative considerations of 'standards' of educational provision and facilities are based firmly in Eurocentric value systems and may not be acceptable to the wider Australian community. This possibility is also heavily dependant on adequate vehicle provision, which is a significant cost. However, these considerations must be placed against the contemporary situation. Birth records from the clinic in Maningrida show that as of May 2005 there were 1,301 children aged between three and 15 years of age. Cross checking this against school records indicates that currently only 613 of these children are enrolled. Furthermore, only 54 per cent of those enrolled actually attend (pers. comm., 13 May 2005). This means that on any given day only one-quarter of the school age population actually go to school. John Taylor and Owen Stanley's work shows that this situation is replicated at Wadeye, where:

> In 2003, only half of the region's school age population was enrolled at school, and only half of those enrolled actually attended classes, and even then mostly on an irregular basis. The low level of commitment to school attendance in the region is reflected in minimal retention to post-primary years with less than one fifth of teenagers of compulsory school age estimated to be attending classes. In effect, only a handful of school leavers enter working age with high school level achievement and skills (Taylor & Stanley 2005: 6).

These examples are further compounded by infrastructure shortfalls and demographic projections of high growth in the school aged population in these areas (Taylor & Stanley 2005). As things currently stand, if even half of the potential school age in the catchment of Maningrida attended every day, the demand for classroom space alone, not to mention associated services and materials, would require massive, immediate investment. So, if policy makers and educators are not going to allow this situation to slide into total intractability, the question becomes what to do?

A decentralised, mobile model of service delivery can provide another option to the plethora of attendance programs that have been tried in the last two decades of Indigenous education (Munns 1998). However, attempts at this will be contingent upon an increase in the number of vehicles currently available to schools in remote areas. While discussions must undoubtedly be had concerning the quality of service mobile, decentralised models can provide, surely in the meantime some schooling is better than none. The experience of the Maningrida outstations, and initial data on the educational and attendance outcomes achieved in this manner[10] show that it is possible to provide an education to Indigenous students, wherever they happen to be.

However, for mobile, decentralised models to be successful they must be predicated on an increased research effort and underpinned by a multi-disciplinary approach, where the anthropological and the pedagogical converge to provide policy options developed from the ground up. A critical application of notions of Indigenous transaction as social reproduction, coupled with the recognition of the potential for intertextuality to provide new discourses of alignment in education, is an example of this. Crucially, such development must be based on

an increased understanding of the roles that vehicles such as Truck Five can play in the generation of synergies between education and the ways that Indigenous people choose to live.

Finally, the new incarnation of Truck Five—for the original has long since gone to the great government auction in the sky—is currently picking its way across boggy roads and corrugations or dodging mangy dogs on the roads of the Maningrida township. Like its predecessor, its importance to Indigenous people and their lifestyles, as well as the crucial role it plays in the educative process, is unlikely to be diminished any time soon. Indeed, perhaps Truck Five and vehicles like it may have an increasing influence on the policy imperatives of the future. So, the meanings and repercussions underlying the question, 'You got any Truck?' should be considered worthy of a new and growing set of understandings in service provision to remote Indigenous Australia.

NOTES

1. 'Muticar' is a local term for vehicle.
2. 'Truck Five' is a fictitious amalgamation of a number of school vehicles.
3. *Balanda* is a generic term used for non-Indigenous people in Arnhem Land.
4. *Djurra* is a Yolgnu Matha term for paperwork.
5. A scheme introduced in 1999 whereby money for vehicle purchases could be deducted automatically from CDEP payments.
6. Meaning to intermingle while weaving, intertextuality is a term first introduced by French semiotician Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s (Kristeva 1969, 1984).
7. The term *Manakay* means literally song, although it is used interchangeably to be a song line or song circle about relationships between life, death and the land and its flora and fauna. These religious *Manakay* are crucial in the reproduction of Indigenous life and spirituality.
8. At a national level disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are stark. Nationally, attendance is lower for Indigenous students than for their non-Indigenous class mates (as low as 75% at the primary level and as low as 70% at the secondary level). In 2000 only 62% of Indigenous students met the national benchmark for Year 5 reading levels (compared to 87% of all students) (Schwab & Sutherland 2003).
9. Despite this, anecdotal evidence suggests that anomalies can still exist and this must be kept in mind when evaluating results (Fogarty & Keane 2003).
10. See Fogarty & Keane 2003.

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