

Rethinking Parent Participation:

A Process Evaluation of the Parents and Learning Program in Napranum

Thesis submitted by

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Abstract

Wide recognition of the value of close links between home and school for children, their families and educators has, in recent times, led to the development of programs and policies supporting the concept of home-school partnerships and encouraging parent participation in education. However, the reality for many Indigenous families is that policies have not translated into practices that fit within the cultural context of family and community, and parents have few opportunities to gain knowledge of the education process and how it affects their children.

The Parents and Learning program views parent participation in education in Indigenous communities as home-based. It is a two year program that actively engages parents in educational activities with their children outside the constraints of the school. Development of the program was in response to Napranum parents' requests for help in preparing their children for the rigours of formal schooling. This thesis presents a process evaluation of the Parents and Learning program in Napranum. It examines how and why things happened, in addition to exploring the impact of the program in the community.

Qualitative methodology was chosen as the most appropriate methodology for the context as it enabled me to capture both the essence of the program and the participants' perspectives. In an effort to determine the effectiveness of the program I focussed on the perceptions of the Indigenous parent participants and personnel as the main stakeholders and key informants.

The research shows that the PaL program was effective in translating concern into action. By providing practical, structured support and concrete, fun activities, the PaL program has begun to unlock some of the mysteries of schooling for parents and children in Napranum. Children and parents are actively engaging in Western literacy and numeracy experiences in their own environment, using their own frameworks of interaction with the support of people they know and trust. These processes are enabling bridges to be built for their children between the culture of home and the culture of school. The identification of the core elements of the PaL program also highlights some of the processes critical in supporting and strengthening families, particularly during the early childhood years.

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Prologue

Since 2001, Indigenous parents in the Napranum community on Cape York Peninsula have been involved in a home-based early childhood education program known as PaL or Parents and Learning. The PaL program was developed by early childhood professionals in collaboration with the Napranum Preschool staff and community for parents of young children in Napranum. It is an early literacy and numeracy parent support program which views parent participation in education as home-based. Although still in an evolutionary form, the program was trialed during 2001 and 2002 in the Napranum community. The evolution of the PaL program and the impact on its participants forms the basis of this thesis.

My involvement in the PaL program began at its inception when I was the Director at Napranum Preschool. Although I resigned from this position in December 2001, I continued to be involved in the ongoing development and support of the program, together with colleague Roshni Senapati. Our commitment to our main work roles of Director and Language Program Coordinator within the Preschool required us to be responsive to community needs. Our involvement in the PaL program was originally an extension of that commitment. We did not foresee the possible potential of the PaL program at its inception but viewed our involvement as following through on the task with which we were both challenged and entrusted by the Napranum Preschool community.

Funded initially with a seeding grant from the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation, the PaL program has been formally evaluated by an independent consultant commissioned by the Foundation. I was involved in the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation evaluation in the collection of data and by assisting the consultant to access stakeholders. I also used this opportunity to collect data for my own research.

My research focuses on the views, expectations and outcomes as perceived by the Indigenous participants. It is my intention to honour the stories of the Indigenous families, parents and personnel involved in the PaL program in this thesis.