

## WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #5

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**Topic: The failure of peer supervisors and the need for competent adult supervision**

Saturday 25 June 2005, marks the end of an era. On this day, participant #1, the last of the Boys from the Bush (BFTB) **peer supervisors** left the Work Placement Scheme (WPS) after 6 months. His departure and the manner in which he departed affirmed my conclusion that the older participants who have had greater exposure to particular early life experiences, including exposure to welfare style personal development programs, have the greatest difficulty maintaining their employment and behaving in a manner that will improve the quality of their lives.

This young man's inability to hold down a job and his past involvement in the BFTB program is an association not a cause of his lack of personal responsibility and what Theodore Dalrymple calls 'an impoverishment of his spirit'. The cause of his behaviour has more to do with his earlier socialization and nature. For a discussion on this topic, see my report titled: *A report on the trial of placing young Indigenous people from Cape York Peninsula region into private sector employment picking fruit in southern states.*

A few months back, participant #1 was caught abusing the work car and was given a reprimand. A week later participant #1 took off with the work car and went for a joy ride around the Riverland, taking all the Renmark participants along with him. He was pulled over by the police and the car was taken away from him. I was called out late that night to drive down to Waikerie and bring them all back to Renmark for work the next morning.

A few weeks later, I had no choice but to leave participant #1 in charge of the Renmark group while I returned to Cairns to recruit more participants. I let him use the work car to drive himself and the other participants to and from work on strict instructions that he was to take the upmost care of the vehicle and that it must not be used for private purposes.

On Friday 24 June, participant #1 again took off with the work car and went for another joy ride to the neighbouring town of Berri and ceased the engine. He didn't tell anyone what happened; he just left the car at the caravan park and said nothing. That same night he hosted a big party in his caravan, the police were called because of the disturbance and several people were charged for possessing dope. The next morning, participant #1 took off for Cairns, leaving the participants with no means of getting to work and the caravan park manager threatening to evict the others for causing trouble that night and not paying their rent. They were not paying their rent because they had no money. They had no money because they were not going to work.

It is important to note that participant #1 had been the recipient of 6 years of my intensive support and supervision – and this is the result.

The fact is that **all** our young participants in the WPS require ongoing **competent** adult support and supervision in order to function effectively in private sector employment away from home and family. This is why I have done away with the idea of peer supervision; it was a practice that worked for the BFTB social-enterprise program (which had a highly structured and tightly controlled environment), but it does not work for this WPS.

This experience supports my view that the WPS, like welfare programs, cannot change the fundamental character of young people. There is a school of thought developed by Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Neal Miller and John Dollard which says that the core of our personality and lifestyle is formed before the age of 6.

What the WPS can do is provide young people with work, life experience and participation in a wider community. This life experience includes education about work and the real world economy. It can also, to a degree, contain or suppress dysfunctional behaviour. It is interesting to note, participant #1 had said to me on a number of occasions, he wished he could go back to the BFTB social-enterprise program.

There is one question that needs to be answered: *For how long do these young people need this ongoing intensive support and supervision?* Clearly, the answer to this question is linked to their maturity and ability to function as autonomous beings. In the case of the BFTB social-enterprise program peer supervisors, they had received intensive support and supervision for years and they are now aged between 20 and 25 years old and they are still behaving like naughty impulsive children. There is, of course, no simple answer to this question of how long will it take for them to grow up.

The way I see it, maturity and ability to function as responsible adults is not an absolute thing. It can be acquired and it can be lost. In some areas, we can be very mature and in other areas we can be highly dependent and extremely irresponsible. For the WPS, this means that participants will vary in their ability to function autonomously. Some will acquire this ability quickly, other will take years, and some may never acquire it. One thing for sure, the environment on Cape York Peninsula is not very good at prepare young people to function as responsible autonomous adults.

26 June 2005