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# EDUCATION, INDIGENOUS SURVIVAL and WELL-BEING: EMERGING IDEAS and PROGRAMS

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## ■ Abstract

This paper presents a snapshot of concerns in the field of Indigenous education in the late 1960s as compared with those of today, highlighting areas of improvement. Indigenous people's aspirations are not being met and the gaps between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations on all major educational indicators are unacceptably large. These gaps are mirrored in other areas of social and physical well-being, including life expectancy and employment. Research demonstrates the inter-relationships between education, health, unemployment, poverty, and general social disadvantage, exposing social barriers to learning. We describe two small-scale educational programs, which are tailored to the needs of the Aboriginal participants and which aim to assist families through education, mentoring and community development processes to work towards practical ways for meeting their long-term aspirations. The holistic nature of the programs helps people to overcome the social barriers, which have impeded their learning in the past. Synchronised inter-agency, inter-departmental collaboration is required by such programs, which are intensive and expensive to run. But USA Project Head Start, which is similarly intensive and expensive, has demonstrated long-term benefits to society and the participants, which far outweigh the original costs in terms of savings in the areas of criminal justice, welfare, and health.

## ■ Introduction

It would be safe to say that, over the past 30 years in Indigenous education, despite substantial improvements in some areas, much remains to be done. In this paper, we will compare the challenges and the perceived solutions within the field of Indigenous education in the late 1960s as compared with those in the early years of the twenty-first century. We will observe some of the lessons we have learned and some we still need to know, the achievements we have made and the many that have eluded us. We will demonstrate how the aspirations of Indigenous families regarding their children's education remain largely unmet. Despite substantial advances in education policy and numbers of programs dedicated to increasing Indigenous participation in schools, the statistics on school retention and attainment, numbers of practicing Indigenous teachers and university graduates remain far below those for the rest of the population.

Similarly, there remains a huge disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's life expectancy, health, rates of employment and imprisonment. Both the literature and experience tell us that this social context creates a serious barrier to Indigenous children's school success. We will examine how the various aspects of this social context have been found to impact on education and how education, in turn, can influence that context. We argue that greater collaboration between the different sectors of social service providers is required in order to both dismantle these social barriers to learning for Indigenous children and their families and provide access to an education that is meaningful and empowering.

In order to ascertain how far Indigenous education has come, we will provide a snapshot of the issues of most currency in the late 1960s by referring to the proceedings of two national seminars (Dunn & Tatz, 1969; Roper, 1969). These seminars brought together a broad range of practitioners, educators, historians, writers, social scientists, psychologists and citizens who were involved in what was then called "Aboriginal Affairs" to discuss ways to improve the education prospects of Indigenous Australians. In this paper, we juxtapose these issues with contemporary issues in the early 2000s. We conclude with the example of two contemporary educational programs with which we are familiar, which have been developed as alternatives to the mainstream programs. These emerging programs highlight a process of community development and

capacity building directed at fulfilling Aboriginal family or community aspirations through school, adult education and work programs. Such family-based, inter-generational and holistic programs require synchronised, effective inter-agency and inter-departmental collaboration in order to be successful.

### ■ Where We Have Come From

The turn of the decade from the 1960s to the 1970s brought a dramatic shift in thinking regarding Indigenous education, health and well-being away from the assimilationist views of the previous 20 years. Indigenous rights to self-determination regarding culture and identity and local community control and development featured on the government agenda for the first time. Despite this sea change in ideology, which was consolidated in government policy after the election of the Whitlam government, the legacy of the past left huge inequities and damage.

Perhaps the most destructive element of past government policy was the removal of Aboriginal children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal families and their adoption and institutionalisation by Europeans. In effect, it was an act of cultural genocide and its impact continues among families today. Debra Maidment explains:

This is only one story among many. But within our own family, the first seven of our parents' generation of 13 have been able to maintain links and stay on their country with their parents. They are the ones who are strong in language, culture and identity today. We ones whose mothers and fathers were removed are the ones who are the most educated, but are still attempting to establish our links to language and find a place on country.

Our parents being taken has left us feeling that we are the ones on the outer and that we are still attempting to establish our place between these two societies. We are living products of that loss of culture. Yes, we've got our education but it goes back to all those values, which makes you a healthy, well-balanced person, your identity and knowing who you are.

Our parents have passed away in their fifties, whereas those who stayed on their country lived into their eighties and nineties. With the high mortality rate, you have to go back and find your own links and strengthen your own relationships with all your family members, ones that you haven't had much to do with over the years. Government policy has divided families. Family members from the same grandparents are still finding each other, and differences in language, culture and social values has meant many family members continue to be displaced. People are still in pain now for the way

that their parents and grandparents were treated. You have to blame that on the government policy.

At the end of the 1960s the child removal policy barely rated a mention in the education literature or in the proceedings of the two national seminars (Dunn & Tatz, 1969; Roper, 1969) referred to earlier. It is notable that Kath Walker (later Oodgeroo Noonuccal), one of the few Indigenous presenters at the seminars, was alone in highlighting the inhumanity of this policy and its devastating effects on Indigenous cultures and identity.

### ■ The Legacy of the Assimilation Era

The ideology underlying the assimilation era had been that if Aboriginal Australians could adopt the values and behaviours of White Australians, they would be accepted into the majority society. Education was seen as the vehicle for assimilation. Tatz explained,

The fundamental assumption is that the Australian state educational systems and their values should be taught to Aborigines: one must teach the Aborigine how to become a white Australian, then teach him a trade, and then expect achievement in the white Australian sense of the term (1969, p. 6)

Also, consistent with this was the view that Whites should direct Aboriginal "development" that "Aborigines shouldn't be allowed to develop as they want to" (Duncan, 1969, p. 191). The emphasis of state governments at the time had been on primary school education because it was believed that by educating Indigenous children, rather than the adults, real advancement would occur when the present generation of school students became parents.

At this time, Aboriginal people from communities in geographically remote locations had no voice and were not brought into the debate. It was only in the 1970s that the people who spoke their traditional languages began to exercise their rights to an education. At the seminars, uncertainty was expressed about the identity and culture of Indigenous people living on the "fringes" of towns and cities, who were viewed as "culturally deprived", having lost their classic languages and customs and speaking "strange" inferior versions of Aboriginal English (Warren, 1969, p. 76). One seminar paper, titled "The education of semi-primitive de-tribalised Aborigines" (Warren, 1969) characterised these so-called "half caste", "fringe dweller" Aboriginal people as "depressed, frustrated and hopeless people ... (partaking of) drunkenness, gambling, immorality, etc., with the lowest of living standards in all spheres" (1969, p. 76). Seminar participants challenged society to overturn this assimilationist ideology by using education to reinforce Indigenous cultures and identity and provide effective pathways to employment and community-controlled development.

## ■ Indigenous Participation

The task of establishing the state-of-play regarding Indigenous participation in education, for the purposes of the seminars, was made difficult by the lack of coordinated, nation-wide, systematic statistical data in the area (Tatz, 1969). Nevertheless, seminar presenters cobbled together approximate figures from each of the states, which were sufficient to indicate an urgent need for measures to both improve participation and stem the attrition of Indigenous people at all levels of education, but particularly at the pre-school and secondary school levels and in the tertiary education sector. At the time, the importance of early childhood education was just being realised on release of Bloom's meta-analysis indicating that the most rapid period of human development was in the first five years of life (Bloom, cited in Roper 1969, p. 203). Also, adult education courses did not offer Indigenous adults adequate preparation for specific jobs and were seen as irrelevant, offering no chance for social mobility. Kath Walker (1969) stressed the importance of educating the adults so that they could then educate the young, thus maintaining respect for the elders by the young. Indigenous adults could also be mentored into teaching other adults. The contemporary use of primary-trained teachers as adult educators was seen to be inappropriate. Improved pathways between the school and tertiary sectors were found to be needed as were more traineeships which led directly into apprenticeships. They also called for more scholarships for higher education study.

## ■ Teachers and Curriculum

The seminars established the need for specialised pre- and in-service teacher education programs for those teaching Indigenous students. They also recommended the professionalisation of the body of teachers working in Indigenous contexts through professional associations, conferences and a professional journal. Specially targeted curriculum materials were needed, as was the widespread dissemination of Indigenous education literature and resources to schools in Indigenous communities. The attitudes of non-Indigenous teachers and their need for cultural awareness and pro-diversity training were highlighted and research into the analysis of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours and ways for changing these was recommended. The development of a literature on Aboriginal history was seen as necessary for both informing teachers and cementing Indigenous identity.

Both seminars acknowledged the damage dealt to Indigenous identity and pride through the assimilation policy and programs with the arrogant assumption that European culture was superior to Indigenous cultures. Schools were now being proposed as a medium through which Aboriginal self-concept, self-esteem and culture could be affirmed and self-respect restored (Chudleigh, 1969). The importance of localising the curricula to the

needs and histories of the specific local community was emphasised. In addition, early education in the vernacular for speakers of Aboriginal languages was recommended. Experimental programs aimed at fostering local Aboriginal culture and identity were recommended and later trialled but, like many such projects at the time, the results of the trials were not widely disseminated and no longitudinal studies were performed. The lack of systematic evaluations, including long-term trials of programs, has been a major omission in Indigenous education over the past 30 years (see also Watts, 1982).

## ■ Research, Policy and Indigenous Leadership

In addition to research into discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, referred to above, local needs analyses regarding education, health and welfare were recommended for the different communities. Evaluation research into different classroom instructional strategies, including instruction in the vernacular, on both a short and long-term basis was also recommended in order to determine what worked in which context and for whom.

Seminar presenters exposed the complete lack of coordination between various layers of bureaucracies and between different organisations, which led to the following recommendations:

- Coordination of the various bodies which fund Indigenous education throughout Australia.
- Interaction between policy makers, administrators and field staff.
- Identification of Indigenous leadership in different jurisdictions around Australia.

## ■ Community Development

Several speakers at the seminars stated that schooling should not be seen in isolation from the rest of the community (Lippman, 1969; Williams, cited in Dunn & Tatz, 1969, p. 120). The importance of adequate health, welfare and infrastructure, including housing, was presented as a prerequisite for effective learning, and many reported that Aboriginal children were coming to school unwell, tired, hungry or unhappy. In order to determine the needs of particular communities, it was proposed that surveys be conducted into all aspects of Aboriginal welfare with most attention being needed in "education, housing, employment and health" (Dunn & Tatz, 1969, p. 109).

Even more fundamental than these factors, it was argued that it was imperative that the direction and initiation for development came from within each Aboriginal community (Iceton, 1969). Roper suggested that, "No one from the outside can bring success and if they don't succeed it means that the Aborigines don't regard these schemes as important" (Roper, cited in Duncan, 1969, p. 191). Structures had to be set up



whereby people experienced “a feeling of power at having some charge over their own destiny – a feeling most important to them or to any group” (Lippman, 1969, p. 317). Chudleigh (1969) called for educators to work collaboratively with community members, not for them, to tackle real life issues according to long-term priorities, which were set by the community. Kath Walker (1969, p. 105) stated that each group must be involved in the formulation of policy for its own welfare. She said:

European-Australians must concede that their failure to help Aborigines in the past stems from the fact that they have never recognized the ... Aboriginal advisers and leaders. Surely the time has come where Aborigines can be approached and asked to help in their own advancement! Round table talks, involving the leaders of various communities, must take place before any policy can be accepted or acted upon (Walker, 1969, p. 104).

It was acknowledged that there was an ongoing conflict between the pressure of the political imperative for short-term, tangible results and the real need for long-term approaches, particularly preventative measures and those which were community driven.

In summary then, in the late 1960s Indigenous participation and attainment in education programs were chronically inadequate. Among the “experts” many recognised that the standard of living, including health, housing and employment in Indigenous communities, acted as barriers to effective education. They acknowledged that Indigenous groups needed to be in charge of determining what was needed in their own communities and how this could be achieved. The importance of identifying the Indigenous leadership in each community and also of developing the capacity of people to change their own circumstances were clearly acknowledged by many. The attitudes of non-Indigenous people were also challenged as creating barriers, and ways for addressing these were seen as needing investigation.

■ Thirty Years Later: Entering the New Millennium

So where are we today? There is much that we take for granted, which was not present in 1970. Australians today have a greater awareness of Australian history, gained from public debate, a published literature, the media and film industry, and the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives in school curricula.

*Development in historical and theoretical understandings*

Unlike educators in the early 1970s, we are aware today that tens of thousands of Aboriginal people have been affected by previous government policy, which mandated the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. In the last 15 years, several books have been written documenting accounts of the impact of the

institutionalisation and removal of Aboriginal children including the national inquiry resulting in the *Bringing them home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion of the various theoretical debates that have sought to offer explanations and solutions to the state of Indigenous education over the past 30 years. Nevertheless, a glimpse at the range of theories can be seen in Table 1, including one major proponent for each.

It is our view that each of these theories has made a constructive contribution to current thinking in Indigenous education at particular levels in particular contexts, but each only offers a partial explanation of an immensely complex situation. For example, Gray’s (2000) program of “Scaffolding Literacy”, the only theory of pedagogy to be systematically trialled in multiple sites, has resulted in dramatic improvements to the literacy levels of Indigenous children in selected schools in the Northern Territory. However, it does not solve the problem of the newly literate child returning to an overcrowded household each evening, submerged in a context of transgenerational unemployment, poverty and high mortality.

Noel Pearson (2000, p. 22) has criticised government policy over the past 30 years for creating dependency and killing initiative among Indigenous communities, thus effectively shutting them out of the real economy, practically, psychologically, socially and emotionally. Recent theorising on the notion of social capital (Falk & Harrison, 2000) and Indigenous learning communities puts education into the local community context whereby formal programs can become “vehicles for the local development of social capital and tools for the construction of local capacity. Importantly, Indigenous learning communities would aim to unite families,

Table 1. Major theories related to Indigenous Australian education 1970s-2000s.

Theory	Proponent (example only)
Cultural difference	Harris, 1980
Neo-Marxist theories	
<i>Reproduction theory and cultural capital theory</i>	Harker & McConnochie, 1985
<i>Resistance theory</i>	Folds, 1987
Critical literacy	
<i>Genre theory, explicit pedagogy and critical pedagogy</i>	Veel, 1991
Post-colonialism	Nakata, 1993
Visible pedagogy	Hudspith, 1996
‘Scaffolding literacy’	
<i>Genre theory, explicit pedagogy, scaffolding, situated cognition</i>	Gray, 2000

schools and communities to identify and address local needs through drawing upon local resources" (Schwab & Sutherland 2001, p. 3).

For our purposes, in the Central Australian context, "community" is family-based rather than some geographic site in which different language groups have been artificially pushed together through White settlement. At the end of this paper, two examples are provided of how this can work in practice, whereby particular Indigenous families engage with particular formal education programs to work towards developing the capacity for self-sufficiency within a particular local context.

### *New policy and programs*

In comparison with the 1960s, we now have comprehensive statistical data to keep us abreast of the state of the field and provide an essential resource for education programs, budgeting and accountability measures. Based on consultation with key Indigenous leaders, Commonwealth education policy has produced:

- 1969 - the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme (ABSTUDY)
- 1978 - the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC)
- 1987 - the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy
- 1990 - the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP)

The recommendations of the NAEP, which was reviewed and reaffirmed in 1995, underpinned all subsequent programs through the 1990s and into 2000, including the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) and the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP) in 2001 (see Department of Education, Science and Training, 2001, p. 8). The states and territories have set up Indigenous education consultative committees to scrutinise education research and act as advisory bodies to governments regarding local policy and programs. Also, Indigenous personnel are in senior departmental positions in federal and state bureaucracies.

In the Indigenous-controlled sector, much has been accomplished also. About 20 Indigenous independent institutes have been established including preschool programs and childcare, and primary and secondary school and adult education programs. Indigenous research and ethics committees and professional Indigenous teacher organisations have been established and professional conferences are initiated, organised and run by Indigenous educators. Some university education faculties have compulsory classes in Indigenous education or Indigenous studies, while others include them as electives. In some universities there are Indigenous Deans, Heads of School, Faculties and Research Institutes. The Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program provides schools, on a per capita basis, with: Aboriginal Student Support and Parent

Awareness (ASSPA) committees, which operate small budgets and are intended to act in an advisory capacity in schools; Homework Centres for after-school homework supervision and support; part-time tutors (ATAS); future study and career related information projects (VEGAS). Anti-racism seminars, conferences, and workshops are conducted periodically around the nation and a small amount of research has been conducted to provide a base of knowledge on race and racism in Australia and in Australian schools.

It appears that the NAEP has led to appropriately targeted programs and participation rates have improved. However, the extent of change has not been sufficient to either overcome the gaps between the outcomes for the non-Indigenous and Indigenous populations or to reach uniformly across the nation. For example, Malezer and Sim (2002) found that around 80% of the 10,000 teachers that they surveyed nationally had not studied units that covered Indigenous studies and education issues in their higher education courses. Other disparities are discussed below.

### *Participation, retention and attainment*

Using equivalent statistics to those provided in 1969, improvements in participation by Indigenous Australians in educational programs at all levels are noticeable. As in 1969, the age distribution of the Indigenous population in 2001 has remained considerably younger than that of the non-Indigenous population, but possibly to a lesser extent (Table 2).

Table 2. Aboriginal education participation estimates for 1966-1967 (Tatz, 1969, p. 1) compared with 2001 (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2001, pp. 12, 30, 69, 91). Note that the 1967 figures may exclude Torres Strait Islanders. \* = % of population.

	1967	2001
Total population	130,130	410,003
Preschool (%) *	2,164 (2%)	10,404 (3%)
Primary (%)*	19,306 (14%)	78,943 (20%)
Secondary (%)*	2,596 (2%)	36,522 (10%)
University (%)*	9 (.007%)	6,414 (1.5%)
TAFE (%)*	111 (.09%)	58,046 (14%)
Special schools	119	NA

Despite this increase in participation across the board, the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school retention and attainment remain unsatisfactorily high. In Table 3 we have collated the statistical information presented in the 2001 parliamentary report (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2001).

In 2001, one quarter of all Indigenous Year 3 students and one third of those in Year 5 did not reach the lowest acceptable levels in either English literacy or numeracy attainment. Only half the number of Indigenous students who had been enrolled in Year 10 in 1999 were enrolled in Year 12 two years later.

Table 3. Gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2001, pp. xviii, xix, 26, 30).  
\* = averaged approximation, # = of all students.

Aspect of schooling	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Gap
3-4 year old enrolment at preschool	48%	57%	9%
Attendance rates: primary & secondary school	87%*	95%*	8%
Meeting Year 3 literacy & numeracy benchmarks	75%	93%#	18%
Meeting Year 5 literacy & numeracy benchmarks	62%	89%#	27%
Year 10-12 apparent retention rate	44%	76%	32%
Achieved tertiary entrance score	19%	53%	34%

Many reasons have been given for how a greater local Indigenous adult presence in schools would help the retention and attainment of Indigenous students from reducing teacher turn-over in remote schools (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999) to their being more understanding of both the cultural and social needs of the students (Beetson, 1997; Hughes, 1981).

*Indigenous teachers and assistants*

In 1979, there were 72 Indigenous teachers in government and Catholic schools (Hughes, 1981, p. 78). In 2001, the number had increased to 1,390 Indigenous teachers. However, the proportion of Indigenous teachers remains less than 1% of the total teacher population, whereas Indigenous students constitute 3.5% of the total population of compulsory school-aged students (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2001, p. 31). The numbers of Indigenous teachers need to double to make them commensurate with the number of Indigenous students.

Some 2,175 Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEW) supplemented the Indigenous presence on school staffs in both school systems. In the government sector, this combination of teachers and AIEWs amounted to one Indigenous adult for every 33 Indigenous students, and in the Catholic sector, one for every 21 (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2001, p. 31). The parliamentary report stated that many of these AIEWs were pursuing some form of professional development that it is hoped will contribute to the numbers of Indigenous teachers (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2001).

In the past 30 years, significant improvement has been made regarding education policy, and programs aimed to improve the responsiveness of schools to Indigenous students' needs. Much remains to be done, though, with regard to retention and attainment and with numbers of qualified Indigenous teachers. While Indigenous young people reach age 15 without being sufficiently literate or numerate to gain quality employment, their options for the future remain severely limited.

*Unmet indigenous aspirations*

Improvements in educational infrastructure and in the policy domain have barely trickled down to those with the greatest needs. Evidence points to widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of schooling among Indigenous Australians (Beresford, 2003), and there is a sense that those in positions of influence with government have not kept in touch with the needs and aspirations of people at the grassroots.

Consultations in the Northern Territory with Aboriginal people from a diverse range of communities have found that family members, in general, want their children to receive a solid formal education (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1999; Maidment, 2004; Malin & Bathgate, 2001). Across the board, most families want their children to be able to "walk tall" in both societies, while retaining and consolidating their Aboriginal identity and culture as their first priority. Parents expect that schooling will assist their children to obtain skilled employment, access to various levels of tertiary education and ultimately greater control in running their communities according to their own priorities and needs. Some parents, particularly those from communities where traditional languages are spoken and who have not themselves received an education that has been an empowering experience, want their children to be able to act as brokers between themselves and the broader society. Not only does this require a high level of English literacy, but also a reasonable knowledge of their legal rights, and government, economics, taxation and legal processes (Maidment, 2004; Malin & Bathgate, 2001). For some families, a major purpose of the school curriculum is to offer traditional cultural knowledge, including spiritual knowledge, taught by the appropriate elders at the appropriate geographic sites (Maidment, 2004).

Aboriginal family members raised many concerns regarding Aboriginal children's schooling (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1999; Malin & Bathgate, 2001). The low levels of English language and literacy among school leavers today are of great concern and some parents believe that their own literacy levels are superior to those of their children. They worry that primary schools are not providing an adequate academic foundation for their children to study at secondary level. The low school retention rates and relatively high rates

of suspension, expulsion and dropout are an area of widespread concern. Many family members want more say in their children's education (Malin & Bathgate, 2001). They want more qualified local Aboriginal teachers because of the high turn-over rate of non-Aboriginal teachers and also because many non-Aboriginal teachers have insufficient cultural awareness and lack understanding of the social barriers to Aboriginal children's learning. Some people believed that many teachers' methods of discipline and ways of relating to children displayed a lack of respect and that they needed to be mentored by Aboriginal adults into appropriate ways of working with Aboriginal children. The poor communications between non-Aboriginal teachers and parents also warranted attention. Some parents believed that the teachers only made an effort to contact them when the child was in trouble. Aboriginal parents asked that they be provided with more knowledge about school processes and the curriculum, and about financial issues such as ABTSUDY and incidental school fees (Malin & Bathgate, 2001). Some also asked for real input into the school curriculum (Malin & Maidment, 2003).

Indigenous educators in geographically remote communities, who were consulted, had particular concerns (Malin & Bathgate, 2001) including about how parents need to be informed that speaking English as a second or third language impacted upon the speed and ease with which their children could acquire mainstream academic standards. They requested that all teachers receive specialist English as a Second Language (ESL) training and many were concerned that primary school children were not being taught in their mother tongue and that somehow bilingual education had disappeared. Many families requested that secondary education be offered in their home communities so that the children did not have to go away to residential colleges. Others were happy for their children to leave the communities for secondary education, but wanted improvements in residential staff cultural awareness and better pastoral support for their children living away from home. Many parents expressed dismay at what appeared to be high levels of teasing and fighting between the different language/dialect groups in schools. Students themselves said that they found learning in school hard because the teachers spoke too fast, used unfamiliar words, and did not explain concepts and tasks with sufficient clarity (Beresford, 2003; Malin & Bathgate, 2001). In sum, consultation at the grassroots informs us that Indigenous families want education to address two areas that are essential to their survival: an education which empowers the next generation with Western cultural knowledge to be leaders and activists while also situating them firmly in their Indigenous culture, language and identity.

### ■ Established Connections

The national seminars from the late 1960s highlighted that the best qualified teachers and the most accessible and well resourced schools are of little value if the child

comes to school in the morning tired, sick, hungry and cold and in the afternoon returns to a home and community life in crisis (Lippman, 1969). This situation has changed little today (Thompson, 2003, p. 130). Clearly, many Indigenous communities are in a state of crisis as reflected in the statistics to follow.

### ■ Indigenous Health and Well-Being

#### *Health*

Indigenous health has made no overall improvement over the last 10 years, with the mortality rate of Indigenous Australians being three times that of the total population. The disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy is 20 years. This is up to four times higher than the gaps in North America and New Zealand, which range from five to seven years. Although infant mortality rates for Indigenous Australians have improved, they still remain 2.5 times that of the total population (Ring & Brown, 2002). With such a high mortality rate many Indigenous families find themselves in perpetual mourning.

#### *General disadvantage*

It is well documented that Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group on other social indicators in addition to health. A recently released report (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2003) included findings by ATSIC that:

- most indicators of poverty and related disadvantage show Indigenous people between two and three times worse off than non-Indigenous people in Australia;
- about 30% of Indigenous households are in or at risk of poverty, which indicates that over 120,000 Indigenous people are below the poverty line (*c.f.* 13% of all Australians);
- Indigenous unemployment rates, which are affected by Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) participation, are well over twice that of non-Indigenous people in cities and regional centres and become much higher in remote areas (the CDEP scheme is one of ATSIC's largest programs);
- preliminary information on Indigenous clients of Centrelink, combined with CDEP participants, show that around 50% of Indigenous adults are reliant on some form of welfare payment;
- being fully engaged in either employment or education decreased the likelihood of poverty;
- Indigenous people in full-time employment or education is around 30% of each age cohort, compared to at least 50% of non-Indigenous people in each age cohort;
- The proportion of Indigenous teenagers (aged 15 to 19) not fully engaged in work or education is three times that of non-Indigenous people; and



- for young Indigenous adults (aged 20 to 24), close to 70% are not fully engaged with work or education (*c.f.* 23% of all young adults). (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2003) *Items in italics have been added by the authors.*

### *Education and employment*

Current statistics show that those people who do not remain until Year 12 at school are less likely to move into full-time work. More than a third of Indigenous teenagers are either unemployed or not seeking employment compared with 10% of their non-Indigenous peers (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2003). It is evident that those most likely to obtain long-term full-time employment are those who make a smooth transition from secondary school into full-time education, training or employment. Hunter concluded, "Education is the largest single factor associated with the current poor outcomes for Indigenous employment. Indeed, the influence of education dwarfs the influence of most demography, geography and social variables" (cited in Devitt et al., 2001, p. 7).

### *School dropout and crime*

The reasons as to why Indigenous children do not finish their formal schooling are many. Aboriginal students are disproportionately excluded from school, either by suspension, expulsion, or dropping out (Gray & Partington, 2003; Malin & Bathgate, 2001). In her study, Gray found that a quarter of Indigenous students who were chronic truants in Year 8 and dropped out in Year 9 had also been suspended for 10 or more days (Gray, 2000, cited in Gray & Partington, 2003). Reasons for truancy and subsequent dropping out are many but high absenteeism leads to poor academic attainment and subsequent feelings of embarrassment or feeling ignored by the teacher. A self-perpetuating cycle develops whereby school becomes an increasingly uncomfortable place to be until finally the student drops out. Evidence shows that some teachers actually discourage children whose behaviour is difficult from attending school (Beresford, 2003, p. 204).

Experiences with racism have been reported as another reason as to why Indigenous children may leave school early. Various research studies and reports have documented racism in schools and, whether it is intentional or not, it can result in Indigenous children feeling marginalised, depersonalised and lacking in self-esteem (e.g., Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Malin, 1997; Senate Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business & Education, 2000; Thompson, 2003). Harassment can take the form of name calling, overt labelling, negative comments about family and "government handouts", and prejudicial treatment.

There is some evidence to show that crime begins with exclusion from schooling (Beresford, 2003;

Johnston, 1991) or alternatively, attendance at schooling can be a disincentive for crime (Malin & Maidment, 2003). However, some argue that schools actually contribute to delinquent behaviour by enforcing strict middle-class values that alienate non-middle-class students (Beresford, 2003). In sum, the social conditions of many Indigenous communities create barriers for learning, limiting people's opportunities for both education and employment. This in turn limits the potential for gaining greater control over one's circumstances and improving quality of life. As argued at the national seminars in the late 1960s, a child's access to learning is dependent upon both his or her individual health and the community's health (Lippman, 1969).

### *Inter-relationships between health, well-being and education*

In the Aboriginal Health Strategy, health was defined as "the physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing of the individual and of the well-being of the whole community" (Anderson, 1997, p. 198). This holistic definition of health which connects the individual with community, and physical health with social, emotional, cultural and spiritual well-being is supported by a body of overseas research called "social determinants" of health research. Results of large-scale correlational studies connect education with health, and further, ill health with a range of other factors, including poverty, racism and a lack of mastery over one's life circumstances. For example, national levels of literacy have been found to correlate with national mortality rates to the extent that a 10% increase in literacy rates is correlated with a 10% decrease in child mortality (Marmot, 1999). In Third World nations, Caldwell (1993) found that each additional year of a mother's schooling accompanied a reduction in child mortality of between seven and nine percent. Such a straightforward connection between schooling and health has not been found in the Indigenous Australian population (Gray & Boughton, 2001). A possible explanation is that the Third World countries involved in Caldwell's research are independent nations, where the Indigenous population controls the education system and prioritises what is taught. On the other hand, Australia's history of colonisation has resulted in the Indigenous population suffering social exclusion, through dispossession, family separations, poverty and racism. They have little if any control over their children's schooling and little control over their life circumstances, in general. Research has demonstrated that social exclusion, unemployment, poverty and racism cause long-term stress and stress, in turn, lead to ill health (Devitt et al., 2001; Rollock & Gordon, 2000; Shaw et al., 1999; Williams, 1999). The level of control that a person has over their immediate environment and life circumstances also influences their stress levels and impacts on their health in consistent ways. Wilkinson and Marmot note, "Continuing anxiety,

insecurity, low self-esteem, social isolation and lack of control over work and home life have powerful effects on health" (1998, p. 10). These social circumstances plague Indigenous lives and possibly erode any of the positive effects of schooling that have been found in third world nations.

#### *Inter-sectorial interventions*

"Social determinants" research has also illuminated factors which contribute positively to people's health. Social support, including access to helpful social networks which provide practical information and practical assistance while encouraging independence and self-sufficiency, has been found to buffer the negative impact of stress (Stansfeld, 1999). In addition, a sense of cultural inclusion within a group has been found to lessen the negative impact of stress by fostering a strong sense of cultural identity, family support and association with members of one's own cultural community (Jackson & Sellers, 1998). This research indicates the interconnectedness between social circumstances or general well-being and physical and mental health. It points to a connection between literacy and schooling and health. Earlier, we discussed how lack of physical and social and emotional well-being are now viewed as barriers to the learning of Indigenous school students. Understanding the nature of this interconnectedness has led governments to believe that a multidisciplinary or inter-sectorial approach to schooling is the way forward (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2001, p. 2). In the United States, this was first attempted in the 1960s through "Project Head Start", and that experiment has provided useful lessons for Indigenous education programs today. Although part of the success of the program is attributed to it addressing disadvantage in the early years, its inter-sectorial nature is also presented as a major factor in its achieving wide-reaching positive outcomes and in its sustainability. It focused on providing educational programs, while simultaneously addressing physical and social impediments to learning.

#### *Project Head Start*

Project Head Start was introduced in the mid-1960s in the USA as part of the "war on poverty". A team of psychologists, paediatricians, nutritionists, child development experts and early childhood educators were brought together to produce a model for an integrated education, health and social welfare program (Roper, 1969; Schorr, 1989). The assumptions that underlay the program were:

- 50% of the poor were children;
- early childhood was a critical period of intervention;
- early intervention programs with children and families could raise IQ scores;

- good nutrition early in life could help mental development;
- life chances of the poor could be radically improved by pre-school exposure to books, writing implements, food, immunisations, assessment of hearing and vision and other impediments to learning;
- the home and community environment were fundamental to the child's receptiveness to learning; and
- flexibility in delivery was essential to allow responsiveness to the needs of diverse communities.

The legislative requirements for funding were:

- a teacher/child ratio of one qualified teacher and two aides for every 15 children;
- specified standards of professional, parental and community involvement; and
- mobilisation of health, nutrition, and social services.

The package included early education, immunisations, medical checkups, hot meals, and social services. In 1966, in its first six months of operation, US\$85 million was spent on programs for 561,000 children. Teachers were employed to work alongside non-professional aides, who were mostly parents and volunteers, operating in multidisciplinary teams of professional service providers. Social welfare included such services for parents as preparation for job interviews and employment programs and location of housing programs (Roper, 1969, Appendix 1).

A prominent and well documented Head Start project is the High Scope Perry Preschool program. The educational component of this program has retained stringent practices including that the children have some say in the nature and planning of their learning activities. Teachers play a supportive rather than directive role, facilitating children's development in the following areas: "initiative and social relations; creative representation; music; movement; language and literacy; classification; seriation; number; space; and time" (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997, p. 26).

The far-reaching benefits of Project Head Start are now evident 27 years later, as the outcomes are compared to those for people of the same age and social group who did not attend Head Start. They include:

- fewer students being kept back a grade in school;
  - lower high school drop out rates;
  - lower placement in special education programs;
  - twice as many employed, or attending tertiary education or training;
  - high school graduation rates of one third higher;
  - arrest rates of 40% lower;
  - lower crime and imprisonment rates; and
  - a teen pregnancy rate 42% lower
- (Grabosky, with Williams, 2003; Schorr, 1989; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Despite Head Start projects being intensive and expensive, economic analyses indicate that the benefits to the participants and society far outweigh the costs. For example, it is estimated that savings to the criminal justice system and potential crime victims alone, of the High Scope Perry Preschool, amount to "\$US49,044 program benefit per individual served". An additional US\$7,000 per individual is saved from lower enrolment in special education programs (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 377).

Head Start has been the most evaluated and publicised of intervention programs in the USA. Schorr (1989) attributes its popularity to its multiple goals that appeal to a diverse range of policy makers and government personnel, which, she believed, has sustained it to the present day. Although it has only reached 20% of all eligible children over the years, it does accommodate some 400,000 each year.

An assumption underlying the effectiveness of Head Start in extending the life options of people living in poverty is its emphasis on the "whole child" within the context of family, where health, poverty and well-being were attended to along with learning. This aspect was implemented specifically for dealing with children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, which gives it relevance to Indigenous Australians. However, as stated earlier, Indigenous Australians want more say in the planning and implementation of education for their children. Also, culture and identity are fundamental to Indigenous well-being. Neither of these issues is accommodated in the Head Start project rationale, as far as we can tell. In fact, in the 1980s a major criticism of the project was the assimilationist nature of its reputed aim to produce "compliant" children who thought, spoke, and behaved as middle-class White Americans/Australians (McConnochie, 1981). The major lesson to be gained from Head Start, with regard to the focus of this paper, is its intensive holistic focus, the high staff to student ratio, and family involvement and capacity building.

### *Summary*

It is evident that Indigenous Australians often become entrapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of low levels of education, unemployment, poverty, poor quality of life, racism, inadequate housing and social supports, poor health, high mortality, constant bereavement and welfare dependency. The evidence indicates that these circumstances lead to high stress levels, mental health problems, drug, alcohol and substance misuse, violence and suicide (Raphael & Swan, 1997). This situation is now viewed within the context of colonisation and inappropriate government policy rather than as the result of cultural deprivation as was assumed 30 years ago.

There has been some improvement to education provision and participation over the past 30 years, but there is still a long way to go. Policy and consultation mechanisms are in place, but not much has changed on

the ground. Ring and Brown (2002, p. 631) said of the health system:

Australia is locked into a cycle of endless consultation, policy and strategy formulation and measurement. Report after report is produced showing that Indigenous health is poor, improvement patchy at best, and that overall, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health is widening.

We suggest that this may also be largely true for education. Perhaps the way forward would be to implement the policy and strategies, which have already been recommended, some more than 30 years ago (Roper, 1969; Dunn & Tatz, 1969), and evaluate their implementation.

"Social determinants" research has demonstrated the importance of an individual's control over their life circumstances to their health. Perhaps this is the key to understanding the huge differences in life expectancy between the Indigenous populations in North America and New Zealand as compared with Australia. As far back as 1969, Dunn and Tatz explained that Indigenous peoples in Canada, USA and New Zealand had more say in their children's schooling than occurred in Australia. Rolley proposed that we have much to learn from New Zealand where Maori people play an active role in the direction of the education of their children:

Industrial contracts negotiated with government contain within them clauses confirming the use of Maori language in the classroom, Maori immersion language classes, the administration of Maori education requires a minimum % of Maori employees, the compulsory teaching of Maori, developing competencies of teachers in Maori, new staffing rates of 1:15 by 2006 (2002, p. 6).

In fact, the New Zealand inspired Aboriginal Family Education Centre (AFEC) movement of the 1970s gave a taste of local control to some 500 Aboriginal parents and grandparents around New South Wales (Teasdale & Whitelaw, 1981). Eileen Lester, a field officer for the movement said:

We have had a four year taste of controlling our education centres through the family - long enough to begin to realise that we like what we have tried and to see a way ahead. No longer is there darkness or gloom at the weight of numbers of white men suppressing us. With our own voice, able to control our own education, we can see now how to be ourselves - Aborigines contributing in the ways we choose in the Australian society (Lester, 1975, p. 193).

Unfortunately, this movement petered out in the ensuing years, but not without leaving an imprint of what is possible given appropriate and sustained government and cross-sector support.

Greater Indigenous control over Indigenous educational destinies is needed at the grassroots level because, not only is it the just strategy which is being called for by Indigenous groups here and around the world (e.g., Beetson, 1997; Durie, 2001), but also past efforts by Australian governments and departments of education, in consultations with Indigenous leaders, have not resulted in adequate improvements at the grassroots level. Greater control, at the local level, promises to result in better educational outcomes and better health. Hard work on the parts of many people has put the policy infrastructure in place, to a large extent, but harder work and deeper negotiations (O'Donoghue, 1992) on the ground are needed to ensure that tangible benefits from that policy are implemented in schools and classrooms and are supported with greater inter-sectorial collaboration.

A number of Australian government reports have recently recommended cross-portfolio collaboration across national, state and regional levels. For example, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in its "Reconciliation Framework" proclaimed that "significant improvements in educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians cannot be achieved without a collaborative, integrated and inclusive approach to improving health, justice, employment and infrastructure at the community level" (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2001, p. 2). This proposition was echoed in the *National report to parliament on Indigenous education and training* (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2001, p. 61) and by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) taskforce (Thompson, 2003). The rhetoric seems sound, but putting it into practice is the challenge and evidence of this happening on a large scale, as in Project Head Start, is not there. However, some families have taken things into their own hands and are devising small, localised programs, such as the following two in Alice Springs.

#### A Holistic Model of Schooling and Community Development

Two innovative alternative Indigenous education programs have been implemented and are being evaluated in Alice Springs. Both are adapted to the specific needs of the Eastern and Central Arrernte community of families who reside in or around Alice Springs. Both would fit Schwab and Sutherland's (2001) concept of Indigenous Learning Communities being Indigenous-controlled and aiming to increase local Indigenous social capital in the region and decrease Indigenous dependency on both government welfare and outside expertise through education and training.

#### *Irrkerlantye Learning Centre*

The Irrkerlantye Learning Centre describes itself as: "an wholistic [sic] and intergenerational model of community development that offers opportunities for Eastern and Central Arrernte people to bring tangible outcomes to the hopes and aspirations they have for their families" (Irrkerlantye Learning Centre, 2003). It operates according to a philosophy much like the "whole of life" definition of health quoted earlier, promoting the general well-being of the Arrernte families through fostering their culture and language, and spiritual, physical and social and emotional wellbeing. Flynn (2001) explained the background of the families:

Most of the people attending Irrkerlantye are affiliated with one or other of the four clans who ... are traditionally associated with lands in Alice Springs ... The settlement of Alice Springs and surrounding pastoral properties has progressively displaced people from any economic engagement with their countries so in most cases they have had to become entrapped in the institutional poverty cycle to survive. This poverty cycle has caused problems for the Arrernte communities who are under constant pressures to conform but with few resources to do so (2001, p. 2).

The Centre's programs have evolved in response to specific community needs and around what works (see Figure 1). They found that the attendance of older family members is an enticement to the youth, many of whom would otherwise not be attending school. Accredited education programs are offered to people of all ages, including primary and secondary school classes and adult education courses in horticulture, construction, art and cultural studies, and media studies. A childcare program for the 0-5 year olds is also located on the premises. Over the five years of operation, certain social services have gradually been set up to cater for the families including: a nutrition program of healthy meals and snacks; advocacy support and referrals to different health and welfare agencies; access to computer, printer, phone and fax facilities; visits from health practitioners from the nearby Aboriginal health clinic; and access to transportation. Art and language and culture-based enterprises have gradually been born out of the adult education classes. The long-term aim of the adult education courses is to provide family members with the skills and knowledge needed to fulfil their community development aspirations, which for many entail revitalising their culture and re-establishing ties with their country. A work program is an important feature of the Centre whereby adults are employed, with CDEP (work for the dole) funding, to maintain the facilities and grounds of the Centre and to assist



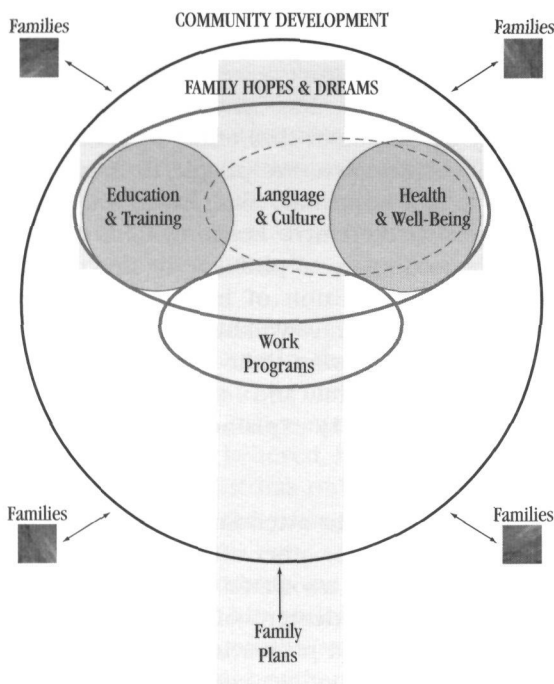


Figure 1. The Irrkerlantye model.

participating families in housing maintenance and the building of basic infrastructure on their homelands.

Senior family members describe the significance of Irrkerlantye as follows:

- It is a strong, supportive place, which is working towards meeting the needs of the community through Aboriginal ownership, control and Aboriginal decision-making.
- It is teaching people to have respect for each other and for their language and culture.
- It acknowledges issues in the community and attempts to work at practical solutions and strategies through educational practices (Malin & Maidment, 2003).

Our research (Malin & Maidment, 2003) has found that secondary-aged students at Irrkerlantye attended more often and achieved at a higher level than they did at their previous schools. Some were not attending school at all in the year prior to starting at Irrkerlantye. As stated earlier, for young people, many of whom live in circumstances of crisis, attendance at Irrkerlantye is a disincentive to getting involved in criminal activity. Our research found that secondary-aged students attending more than 50% of the time were not involved in crime. Those who were apprehended by the police were the less frequent attendees and police apprehensions of students were less likely to occur when the school was open and when attendance was higher.

One of the greatest barriers Irrkerlantye faces to its survival is its dependence upon funding from a diverse range of government departments and agencies. Much time and energy is spent in convincing the agencies of its worth and in writing submissions and financial reports. Recently, in an effort to lessen this burden, moves have been made to

coordinate these agencies and others into a legally binding “whole of government” funding package on a triennial basis as COAG has done in its Indigenous Community Coordination Pilot (ICCP) trials. This process combines funding across a range of portfolio areas into one agreement, one work plan and one reporting mechanism. Whether and how this will occur is yet to be determined.

Irrkerlantye Learning Centre aims to foster the cultural and social survival of the families involved. It demonstrates how the barriers to learning, so extensively documented in the research literature, can be challenged through a program which brings together a comprehensive package of services, funded by a broad range of government and Indigenous-controlled services. It is reminiscent of the Head Start program, but with two important additions: local control of the priorities of the Centre and incorporation of local culture into all aspects of the program.

### *Genuine capacity building: Artekerre, Mending the Broken Spirit*

In the 1969 seminar proceedings, people were already admonishing non-Indigenous workers in Indigenous communities to work with not for “the people”, to work “collaboratively” and “consult with communities”. In the Northern Territory, it seems that these phrases are commonly used while non-Indigenous advisors continue to do much of the work, plan and organise the meetings, hire the workers and implement programs with Indigenous people remaining as token representatives of their communities. It is possible that the long litany of failed programs blamed on the lack of Indigenous commitment is the result of failure to genuinely negotiate with the authentic local leadership, to establish real partnerships working towards fulfilling a community’s self-identified needs. Even when a program is fashioned around the expressed aspirations and needs of a community, the non-Indigenous advisors can fail to pass on their skills and knowledge to the Indigenous community with genuine capacity development. Some find it hard to “let go”. Most do not know the practicalities of handing over control or have inadequate time available or may be confounded by the perceived lack of confidence and the low levels of Western knowledge on the parts of some community members. In some cases, Indigenous community members may seem reluctant to assert their wishes for fear of hurting the feelings of their White advisors. All this underlines the importance of documenting and disseminating successful models of community development and capacity building.

In her project “Artekerre, Mending the Broken Spirit”, Debra Maidment (2004) was operating under the assumption that:

The design and delivery of [Indigenous people’s] own education programs based on their

communities' priorities, needs and aspirations, was essential to achieving genuine self-determination. Without control over their own education Aboriginal people are unable to develop their capacity to be self-determining and to exercise their rights of self-determination ... The only way that Aboriginal people will ever become empowered through education is by doing it their own way, in their own time, and with their own people.

Maidment aimed to put into practice this proposition, which is also in keeping with Goal 3 of the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP):

To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal students and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of post-school education institutions (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1999, p. 4).

Using action research and action learning methodologies, Maidment collaborated with members from three dispersed homeland communities, including her own, to design, implement and trial two Vocational Education Training (VET) curricula. The curricula aimed to assist the students in overcoming issues that had in the past operated as barriers to their learning and enable them to increase the control they had over their life circumstances. The consultation and negotiation process centred around the following two questions:

- What would Aboriginal people like to see in the education system?
- What would improve their quality of life?

Themes that emerged as central to their learning were: social and emotional well-being, cultural identity, employment and economic independence. The courses incorporated these themes and included topics such as:

- Research into the significance of land to the local Aboriginal people.
- Implementation of cultural maintenance strategies.
- Researching local flora and fauna used for food and medicinal purposes.
- Improve personal development skills.
- Develop leadership skills.
- Research key historical issues.
- Identify how Aboriginal organisations manage finances.

The resulting accredited courses were: Certificate Level 3 in "Community Development Facilitation" and Certificate Level 4 in "Aboriginal Land and Leadership".

The Level 3 course was trialled and evaluated and evidence of its success were the high attendance and achievement levels of the students and the high enrolments in subsequent years. The outcomes of the project include:

- A process of consultation, which allows Aboriginal people, with low levels of formal education and histories of unemployment and poverty, to collaborate in the development, evaluation and implementation of a VET curriculum, which focused on addressing their self-identified needs.
- A process of curriculum development which included the training and employment of community-based facilitators of the curriculum and established and used a protocol for utilising local people's (including elder's) knowledge and skills within the curriculum.
- A tool for developing the capacity for Aboriginal people to take control over their own education.
- A process that built an awareness of Aboriginal peoples' rights for self-determination and appropriate service provision.

In order to implement such a program, a change in organisational thinking is required. The imperative must become "How do we service the interest of the people and be accountable for delivery of services to the people?" Too much emphasis has been placed on "How do we deliver on the outcomes set by funding bodies and be accountable to those funding bodies?" (Maidment, 2004)

## ■ Conclusion

The legacy of previous government policies, which mandated the removal of Aboriginal children of mixed descent from their families, has had long-term and devastating consequences. The children who were taken, for the most part, acquired Western knowledge but lost their Indigenous knowledge and culture. Those who were not taken maintained their Indigenous knowledge but gained insufficient cultural capital to negotiate with the European society. Addressing these dual aspirations for revitalising local Indigenous knowledge and acquiring Western cultural capital knowledge are a key to Indigenous survival, on their own terms, and remain a challenge for education programs into the future. Despite federal government policies of self-determination and self-management from the 1970s, these also remain unattained long-term goals for most Indigenous communities.

There have been improvements in the field of Indigenous education over the past 30 years. Consultations have occurred with Indigenous leadership at the state and national levels and the major policies are in place. However, a huge gap remains in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, the general social disadvantage of Indigenous Australians is widely acknowledged, as is an understanding of how this acts as a barrier to learning, impeding the opportunity for people to receive a good education and thus gain more control over their life circumstances and improve their quality of life.

In order to break this vicious cycle, we believe that formal educational programs must be delivered with regard to the learning barriers created by difficult social

contexts. This requires holistically focused programs, harnessing inter-sectorial collaboration, as was accomplished through Project Head Start. But equally as important, Indigenous people must be listened to and their suggestions carried out. Non-Indigenous people working in the field must try harder to pass on their knowledge and skills, let go of control, and trust the judgement of their Indigenous colleagues. Those people in influential leadership positions have the ongoing challenge of remaining in touch with the needs of people at the grassroots level. Furthermore, programs that appear to be working should undergo evaluation and the lessons learned should be widely disseminated so that others may benefit. Small, holistic, flexible, tailor-made programs such as the Central Australian programs described here are costly in the short-term. However, as Project Head Start has demonstrated, the long-term benefits to both society and program participants in the areas of health, welfare, justice and education, promise to far out-weigh the original costs.

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**■ About the authors**

Since teaching in bush schools in the 1970s Merridy Malin has been interested in learning about ways that schools could become more responsive to the needs and capabilities of Indigenous children. She explored the contributions of Native American independent Survival Schools in Minnesota to Ojibwe and Dakota children and their communities. In Adelaide, she investigated the skills and knowledge that Nunga children brought to school and how these could be harnessed in their early years in classrooms to promote effective school learning. Currently she is a senior lecturer at Charles Darwin University. She lives in Alice Springs and, with Debra Maidment, has been conducting research for the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health investigating whether and how an Arrernte-run intergenerational school and community development program is impacting upon the health and well-being of the Arrernte participants.

Debra Maidment is from Alice Springs, Central Australia. She is of Arrernte Mpwarnte and Alyawarre descent. In her professional career she has worked as a receptionist, a Coordinator of Education & Training, a Manager, a Deputy Director and a Deputy Director of Research and Development within the Institute for Aboriginal Development over 11 years. In her education journey she left school on completion of Year 10 to move to Adelaide to attend secretarial college. She returned to study at the University of South Australia and La Trobe University where she is close to completing a Masters of Education and Training. Debra has played an active role in Aboriginal education and research by being a representative on several Boards and Advisory Committees. She has also played an active role in Native Title by being a representative on the newly established Native Title committee Lhere Artepe. She has conducted two research projects for the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health focusing on the connections between health, education and community development. Currently she is Manager of the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre, an Arrernte intergenerational community development program in Alice Springs.