

A brief personal view

The poor educational outcomes of Indigenous students have been widely recognised, at least since the time of Collins Report¹. As documented more recently, Australia is slow in *Closing the Gap*². In many parts of remote Australia, adolescents are now less literate than their parents and grandparents.

Many people from remote Indigenous communities do not understand the basics of the Western economy, nor the expectations that apply in mainstream society. They often lack the knowledge, skills and opportunities that are needed both to find employment, and to solve the social, health and lifestyle problems facing them and their communities³. These social problems have been compounded in recent years by the loss of traditional controls and by the welfare economy. Some of these complexities are elaborated in the appended Table 1.

Thus the issues to be addressed are those of cross-cultural expectations and understanding, as well as those of literacy and numeracy. For example, for some years, there has been a reluctance to teach useful knowledge and survival skills relevant to hygiene, nutrition, basic economics, and civic responsibility, probably because such an approach was seen as paternalistic, and threatening to traditional Indigenous society, and to the Arcadian view that traditional society could be restored through simple measures such as a return to homelands.

Sadly, this educational ethos has trapped several generations of Indigenous people in an unsatisfactory transitional world without the knowledge and skills to thrive in either culture, where education may not be seen as useful or as a pathway to opportunities in their future lives. Education needs to impart the expectations and survival skills, and the literacy and numeracy that will help Indigenous Australians to see the opportunities on offer, to take meaningful control of their lives and to engage on a more equal basis with mainstream Australia.

These challenges have already been taken up by a number of Indigenous organisations⁴, advocates and educators^{5 6 7} and by government⁸. However, the changes that need to be implemented for remote area schools have many implications for teacher recruitment and training, curricula and classroom practice, as well as for school resourcing, governance and community liaison.

John Mathews

¹ Collins, R. (1999). *Learning the lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin

² Commonwealth of Australia. Prime Minister's Report. *Closing the Gap*, 2010.

Hughes, H & Hughes, M. *Indigenous Education 2010*. The Centre for Independent Studies. Policy Monograph 110.

³ The social problems have been well documented for many years, most recently by Nicolas Rothwell and others in the *Australian* news paper eg May 8, 2010, *And they call it failure to thrive*.

⁴ Tiwi Education Board. http://www.tiwilandcouncil.net.au/WhatsBH/Whats_BH_frame_edu.htm

⁵ Langton, M & Rhea, ZM. *Indigenous Education & the ladder to prosperity*. In *Perspectives*

⁶ Pearson, N (2009) *Radical hope – education & equality in Australia*. Quarterly Essay 35.

⁷ Sarra C. 2010, Indigenous Education Leadership Institute. Various papers

⁸ Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-4 - www.mceecdya.edu.au

TABLE 1.**Select Workshop on Indigenous Education¹****Matters to be questioned and addressed**

Matters	Comments & potential responses
Indigenous culture and western culture are often seen as inconsistent.	Yet in recent generations, both cultures have been subject to dramatic change, not least from new technology. Indigenous culture has also had to deal with new diseases, and with the many social problems arising from loss of traditional lands, lifestyles and social controls, increasing fertility and overcrowding, and the welfare economy. There is great opportunity to harness the shared values & goodwill in both cultures and to re-establish education as a tool for social renewal and reform.
Western education will destroy traditional Indigenous culture.	Traditional culture is already at risk because of passive welfare, alcohol & drug abuse, violent videos, and gambling. Education can provide Indigenous people with the knowledge and skills to manage these threats and to help preserve the valuable aspects of traditional culture
Western education is inappropriate if there are few job opportunities, as in remote Australia	There would be plenty of job opportunities in local communities if Indigenous people have the knowledge and skills to work as builders, plumbers, book-keepers, store-keepers & managers. Indigenous children should also have the opportunity to aspire to careers in areas such as conservation, science, law, medicine, engineering & mining, even if this means that they might have to leave the home community, at least temporarily
Many Indigenous people don't value work	The welfare economy is replacing the traditional economy for many Indigenous Australians; some have yet to see that employment can not only deliver greater material benefits, but also help their communities to deal with the existential threats from alcohol, drug abuse and violence.
Education has only a marginal role to play in solving the existential crises of Indigenous communities plagued by unemployment, gambling, substance abuse, violence and suicide.	Indigenous families are walking between the traditional world, and the modern world, with expectations and values influenced by "mission days", and more recently by violent TV & videos, and the welfare economy. Education must play a more pro-active role in explaining these confusing and conflicting worlds, in helping children to a sense of purpose and aspiration, and in imparting a sense of obligation for them to help themselves and their people.
Indigenous parents don't care about the education of their children	On the contrary, many parents and grandparents are concerned that their children are less literate than them, even though literacy amongst those earlier generations is itself poor by Australian standards.
Indigenous children aren't necessarily interested in the opportunities that education can provide.	Children need to know about the opportunities that education and the wider world can offer. This is difficult in situations where there are few role models.
Indigenous children will be more interested in cultural, artistic, sporting, artistic or	Even so, Indigenous Australians need skills that come from formal education if they are to manage careers in such areas successfully.

¹ Although this Table is most relevant to education of Indigenous children in remote Australia, some issues in urban settings are not dissimilar.

environmental opportunities.	
Indigenous adults in remote Australia have little need of formal education.	To be effective as translators, cultural brokers, leaders and managers for their communities, at least some adults need good English and a good knowledge of Western expectations and values.
Most Indigenous leaders in remote communities have conversational English, which is adequate for consultation with advisers, government and the private sector.	Conversational English may not be backed by enough vocabulary and by the necessary deep knowledge for meaningful communication and consultation in English. As a result, Indigenous people continue to be dependent on advisers, and are often unable to engage fully with the issues of greatest import for them.
Expectations and values in Indigenous communities differ from Western expectations and values, but these differences do not need to be examined in the education system.	Indigenous concepts of good behaviour are based on obligations to land, family and skin groups, whereas Western values emphasise individual responsibility, tempered by justice and fairness, and obligations to society as a whole. Unless these ideas are explored and explained in school, Indigenous children will not understand the expectations of wider Australian society, will misunderstand how society and the economy operate, and will fall by default into welfare dependence.
Most children acquire cultural knowledge and skills from their parents, often before they go to school, and that knowledge does not need to be taught.	Unfortunately, after generations of educational failure in remote communities, Indigenous parents may themselves have a poor understanding of the mechanics and expectations of Western culture. Accordingly, their children may not have learnt the habits for healthy living, nor have a sense of how the economy and the wider world work and what their opportunities might be.
Early childhood education is difficult to establish in Indigenous communities, in part because of community attitudes to child-raising and because of gambling and other competing priorities.	Early childhood education can help fill the void at the cultural interface; this will also need to involve mothers, particularly those young mothers who may themselves have missed out on the life competencies that need to be passed on to the next generation.
Indigenous children in some remote communities cannot succeed in education because of hunger or poor nutrition, interfering with concentration, and because of deafness resulting from high rates of ear infections, and other health problems.	These problems are real, and they must be solved, rather than being used to justify “giving-up”. Children who are neglected or hungry in the morning should be fed at school, children with ear infections should be treated, and children with hearing disability should receive the special support they need.
It is paternalistic to feed Indigenous children at school.	Yes, but when necessary, society must provide the care that would otherwise come from parents and family. There is no shame in this, as generations of English children thrived on “school dinners”, and Australian children had free “school milk” as late as the 1960s. Furthermore, if students contribute to food preparation, they will learn skills that will be useful throughout life.
Few practical skills have been taught in Indigenous schools and communities, so that kitchen hygiene, home maintenance, and vehicle repairs tend to be neglected. This wastes resources and undermines any sense of personal responsibility.	Indigenous schools can help at several levels. Schools can teach the lessons of basic hygiene and explain that the welfare economy is only part of the whole economy, and that the large majority of Australian families have employment opportunities. They can also explain that in non-Indigenous communities, there is an expectation that people are more active in solving their own problems, and that resources should be valued and maintained. Finally, at higher primary and secondary level, schools can begin to teach the practical skills that would be taken up more formally by students

	electing to train in trades.
Indigenous children will not accept the discipline of regular school attendance.	Children are more likely to want to go to school if they have vital and engaging teachers who engage them with the excitement of learning, aspiration for the future, and a sense of accomplishment, whether it be from an academic, artistic, sporting or practical achievement.
Peer-group influences are often negative in Indigenous communities	Pre-adolescents and adolescents can become involved in petrol-sniffing and abuse of other substances, effectively rejecting both the traditional authority of elders, and the western authority represented by school. Solutions are difficult, and must start with a cooperative commitment by community leaders and schools to support early childhood education, and to encourage children to see that education offers opportunities for self-fulfilling careers, whether in sport, art, or trades or professions.
Overcrowded homes and noisy videos make it difficult for children to sleep regular hours, and they are often too tired in the morning to concentrate.	Children who are highly motivated to attend school will find somewhere to sleep, and are more likely to get up in the morning. If this is impossible in a dysfunctional community, it may be possible to provide school dormitories, or with parental approval and community support, to relocate children to an offsite school (as on the Tiwi Islands) on week-days.
Attendance at school is necessarily interrupted by traditional ceremonies, particularly in the dry season, and by “sorry business” at any time.	Interruptions for ceremony can be minimised by negotiation with elders to ensure that they mostly coincide with school holidays. Sorry business cannot be scheduled, but rules may be negotiable with community leaders to minimise disruption to classes.
Spending time on small outstations in traditional homelands has helped to minimise alcohol and other social problems in Indigenous communities. However, because of family mobility and diseconomies of scale, it is difficult to deliver high quality education to children on outstations.	Solutions, to be negotiated with community leaders and parents, could include options such as the upgrading of homelands schools in some locations, the establishment of more boarding schools, and/or commitments from parents to keep their children in communities where schooling is available, and to arrange homeland visits by children during school vacations.
Bilingual education is necessary if Indigenous students are to learn English as a second language.	ESL teachers can teach English successfully to non-English speaking immigrants. Likewise, specially trained teachers can teach English successfully to Indigenous children, even if the latter can speak only the traditional language or creole.
Bilingual education is necessary to help preserve traditional languages, cultural knowledge and values.	In previous generations, traditional language and culture were preserved outside the school setting. Good bilingual education can help to preserve languages that are at risk. However, some “bilingual programs” in schools, with the best of intentions, have made little contribution to language or culture, while distracting substantially from the teaching of English literacy & numeracy. Hence there needs to be both expert and community input into the programs offered.
Maintenance of traditional language and culture will inhibit the learning of English.	Young children learn languages easily; their first language will only inhibit English if there is insufficient time and care devoted to English in the classroom.
Indigenous teachers or teaching aides are essential in the classroom.	Many Indigenous teachers make outstanding contributions. However, some teaching aides have limited literacy and numeracy; in remote communities the classroom role of teaching aides can sometimes conflict with their role as “auntie” to students in the class.

Qualified teachers do not need additional training to succeed with Indigenous students.	Although some dedicated teachers with exceptional personal qualities have been able to motivate and succeed with Indigenous students, most teachers would benefit from special training to provide the additional knowledge and skills needed to succeed in Indigenous schools.
Teachers should concentrate on the basics of English literacy and numeracy	Absolutely
The curriculum for Indigenous students should be the same as in mainstream Australian schools	On the contrary, the curriculum needs to be enriched to give Indigenous children a basic understanding of health and of society, and of the economy in the wider world. The different values and expectations of the wider world will need to be discussed, and the role of education in helping Indigenous communities to help themselves needs to be clearly articulated. Individual teachers need considerable support with this (eg teaching materials developed in consultation with community leaders and relevant experts).
Old-fashioned classroom teaching is not needed in an on-line and media-driven world.	Although some basic skills for numeracy and literacy can be learnt or enhanced on-line, all students need personal support and motivation to acquire basic skills. Once they approach the threshold for self-learning, they need continuing guidance to help them to be critical and selective with the overload of information available on-line.