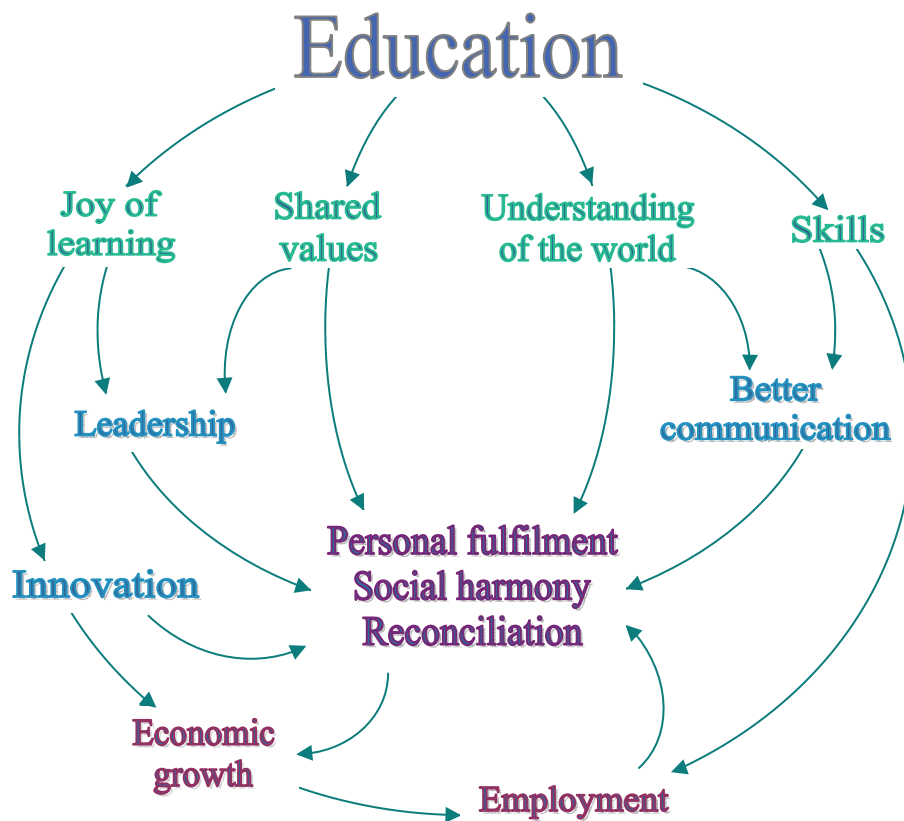


# Closing the gap in Indigenous education

## Workshop Report

7-8<sup>th</sup> July 2010



# Closing the gap in Indigenous education

## Workshop Report

*“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way it treats its children” – Nelson Mandela*

*Beware “the soft bigotry of low expectations”  
Quoted by Noel Pearson*

Report from a workshop convened by the  
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7-8<sup>th</sup> July 2010

## Preface

The Menzies Foundation was established in 1979 to honour the memory of Sir Robert Menzies, Australia's distinguished and longest-serving Prime Minister. The Foundation has helped to establish the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, the Menzies Research Institute in Hobart, and the Menzies Centre for Health Policy in Sydney and Canberra. It also supports prestigious Menzies postgraduate scholarships for Australian graduates in law, engineering, allied health and medical research.

The Foundation also supports occasional workshops to provide leadership on matters of national importance. For example, in 1986, in partnership with the Menzies School of Health Research, the Foundation organized a seminal workshop in Alice Springs to discuss Health Research with Aboriginal people. That workshop provided the first opportunity ever for Aboriginal leaders to confront researchers, and to communicate their sense of frustration about a research agenda set by researchers, often without consulting research subjects, and without taking community wishes into account. Eventually that workshop came to be seen as a real turning-point and as the stimulus for NHMRC to develop extended ethical guidelines for research involving Aboriginal persons and communities.

This most recent workshop, *How to close the gap in Indigenous education*, on 7 and 8<sup>th</sup> July, 2010, was attended by 34 invited experts and interested persons, including Aboriginal teachers and leaders, teachers and academics, health experts, persons with cross-cultural expertise, and education officials. There was a major focus on measures that would help Indigenous children in northern and remote Australia, where the educational gap is greatest. Workshop participants were encouraged to speak frankly, under the Chatham House rule, and to identify and address the most salient social and educational issues.

The workshop participants hope that this report will enrich the important national discussion about strategies to improve Indigenous educational outcomes<sup>1</sup>. The report summarises the background issues, and the major conclusions and recommendations reached after participants provided feedback on earlier drafts. The original workshop program is provided in Annex A; the names and affiliations of participants are listed in Annex B. Our Foundation website<sup>2</sup> also provides links to formal presentations made at the workshop, to summaries of the breakout sessions, and to several background papers.

We thank all workshop participants for their valuable contributions of time and expertise, and congratulate Sandra Mackenzie and Pam Shearman from the Foundation secretariat for their efficient planning and management of the workshop, and for the production and distribution of this report.

John Mathews  
Executive Director  
Menzies Foundation

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous Education Action Plan - [http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/indigenous\\_ed\\_action\\_plan\\_2010-2014\\_consultation,29978.html](http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/indigenous_ed_action_plan_2010-2014_consultation,29978.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.menziesfoundation.org.au](http://www.menziesfoundation.org.au)

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## *Executive Summary*

1. In the longer term, improvements in education will help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to better manage their own lives and culture, to solve their social problems, and to find better health and meaningful employment.
2. The need for educational reform is most pressing for socially disadvantaged traditional communities in remote and northern Australia, where participation rates in education are low and outcomes are very poor by national standards.
3. For outcomes to improve, Indigenous leaders and parents will need to work in partnership, with teachers in a revitalized education sector that links school councils with educators, researchers and professionals from areas such as health and social welfare. Parents will need assistance, at community level, to connect with schools and educators, and to break down barriers that limit their present involvement.
4. Governments should work through school councils with defined roles and constitutions to support community decision-making. As local capacity and experience grow, school councils should assume effective control of line budgets and staff appointments, as well as responsibility for making decisions about educational processes, for monitoring the performance of staff and students, and for linking education to other community-based activities.
5. Teachers should be specially recruited and be prepared for work in remote communities through specialist training that provides:
  - a. Skills in cultural competency specific to their school location;
  - b. Skills to teach English as a second language;
  - c. Specialist skills in teaching literacy and numeracy;
  - d. An understanding of the social, educational and health problems faced by Indigenous communities and of the measures available for mitigation;
  - e. Understanding that will help them to cooperate with parents and community leaders, and with other professions and agencies;
  - f. A commitment to evidence-based practice in supporting educational reforms and social reforms required by the community.
6. Teachers should have high expectations of students, and use evidence-based approaches to teaching and assessment to ensure outcomes comparable with those of non-Indigenous students. Teachers should be able to draw upon digital technologies for the particular help that students in remote schools will need if they are to achieve an adequate understanding of the wider world.
7. Experts should be commissioned to work with school councils and community leaders to develop learning materials (including TV and digital programs) that are evidence-based, age-appropriate, and culturally engaging for children in remote communities.

8. School and community-based initiatives, planned and led by school councils in partnership with other agencies, should aim to:
  - a. Enhance child development and readiness for school learning through:
    - i. Maternal and child health programs, coordinated with mothers' groups, child-care and pre-school education to give children a healthy start to life and education;
    - ii. Counselling, by specially trained Indigenous mentors, to support parents and children in the transition to school;
  - b. Support language development and literacy through:
    - i. Specialist teaching of English as a second language;
    - ii. Bilingual (team) teaching involving local Indigenous teachers, to achieve a firm grounding in language development in the early years, better acquisition of English and improved education outcomes ;
    - iii. Formal biliteracy programs in schools where there is strong community support;
  - c. Facilitate adult education to further develop the skills of school council members and community leaders and to provide second chance education for other adults;
  - d. Ensure strong community commitment to VET and employment initiatives; and involvement with their children's schooling ;
  - e. Facilitate community engagement and cooperation with the private sector and with other organisations. For example:
    - i. Partnerships with the private sector to secure financial support, mentorship, work experience, training and job opportunities;
    - ii. Partnerships with schools and sporting clubs that will provide opportunities for exchange visits, scholarship placements, role modelling, and incentives for continuing education.
9. Collaborative projects should be developed to evaluate how social disadvantage and current educational processes have affected educational outcomes for Indigenous children in remote Australia and to review current evidence on the effectiveness of intervention strategies.
10. Collaborative research projects, based on reviews of existing evidence, should be developed to identify evidence-based strategies that would support:
  - a. A smooth transition to school for children in the early years, with greater engagement of parents, family and the wider community, and greater awareness of the benefits of education;
  - b. High rates of student satisfaction and regular school attendance;
  - c. Measures to assess student progress in ways that are culturally and developmentally sensitive;
  - d. Improved literacy and numeracy outcomes, and greater awareness of life opportunities;
  - e. Effective approaches to secondary and VET education, and employment;
  - f. More effective cooperation between teacher education and training institutions, communities, and government.

## ***Conclusions and recommendations***

### **Education as a driver of health and social and bureaucratic reform**

11. Improvements in education will help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities to acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions to better manage their own lives, to maintain their culture, to find better health and meaningful employment, and to lead their communities away from the social problems arising from welfare dependency and substance abuse.
12. However, improvements in Indigenous educational outcomes will be difficult to achieve without substantial changes of attitude and major reforms of education policy and practice to achieve genuine partnerships with communities and more effective collaboration between agencies and professions.
13. The educational sector should cooperate more directly with community organizations, other sectors of government, other professional groups (researchers, health workers, social workers, sport and arts advisers and police), in both joint training initiatives and in program planning and responses at community level.
14. As local capacities grow in schools and communities, decision-making about educational and community business should devolve progressively to community organisations.

### **Evidence, research, planning and evaluation**

15. Educators and teachers should understand the pre-requisites for educational success:
  - a. International evidence shows that educational, health and social outcomes are better for children when mothers (carers) are better educated and healthy, when mothers and children receive educational and social support in the pre-school years, and when families actively support their children's education.
  - b. Australian evidence shows that education outcomes, as currently measured against national norms, are worse for Indigenous children in remote locations where home and health infrastructures are usually inadequate, carers are often unhealthy or poorly educated, where pre-school education is often unavailable, where teachers may not have necessary specialist skills, and where school attendances are poor.
  - c. Improved educational outcomes should thus follow improvements in basic housing and environmental health infrastructure, maternal and child health, pre-school education, school attendance, and quality teaching practice.
16. Educators and teachers should make an overarching commitment to evidence-based practice.
  - a. Educational practices should be tested against the best evidence available.
  - b. Existing evidence should be rapidly reviewed, so that reforms need not be unduly delayed while awaiting publication of outcomes from new primary research;
  - c. New initiatives should be planned and implemented through partnerships with Aboriginal leaders, experienced teachers, academics and education officials;
  - d. Whenever possible, changes in practice should be introduced with a parallel plan for formal evaluation.

17. Further research is needed to answer questions relating to:
  - a. Educational policy and teaching practice for Indigenous children;
  - b. Social and cultural factors affecting school attendance, and measures that will help to improve it;
  - c. Factors affecting the uptake and success of maternal and child-health programs, pre-school education, and other interventions in early life;
  - d. Lifestyle and environmental factors (e.g. housing, family, nutrition and health) affecting educational success.
18. Research methodologies to help improve Indigenous education outcomes can be observational, qualitative, and/or intervention-based, and may require that educators and teachers work collaboratively with partners from other professions.
19. However, all research protocols must be rigorous and address research questions with the greatest potential but to yield tangible benefits. Sharply focussed research to answer specific questions is most likely to yield evidence to support specific remedial action through new policies and programs.
20. All research should be planned, implemented and evaluated in partnership with relevant stakeholders (officials, educators and teachers, parents and community organizations). Suitable strategies include:
  - a. Evidence-based practice to be incorporated in teacher training;
  - b. Research schools allowing for partnership and reflective practice;
  - c. Dedicated supernumerary researchers based in or linked to schools;

## **Responsibilities of training institutions and teachers**

21. Institutions that prepare teachers to work with Indigenous children, whether in pre-school or later years, should explicitly recognize the wider responsibilities that these teachers will have to assume, and tailor their training programs to ensure that:
  - a. Teachers understand how the social and physical environments of Indigenous communities have adverse effects on child health and on education outcomes for Indigenous children<sup>3</sup>;
  - b. Teachers are well prepared to liaise with other professionals in teaching the lifestyle skills that will help Indigenous people to lead healthier lives;
  - c. Wherever possible, teachers are encouraged to use health and lifestyle content as a vehicle for teaching literacy and numeracy, so that the important outcomes can be achieved without undue burden on busy timetables;
  - d. Teachers have high expectations for educational achievement of Indigenous students, together with the skills to support students in meeting those expectations;
  - e. Teachers use the best mix of teaching methods (including data driven, evidence-based methods and new technology) to ensure language development and achievement in English literacy and numeracy from an early age, and to promote an early appreciation of science and the wider world;
  - f. Teachers are encouraged to work with Indigenous leaders and other community workers and to discuss and implement initiatives to progress:

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<sup>3</sup> It is widely recognized that chronic otitis media (middle ear infections), still ubiquitous in many remote communities, contributes to hearing loss and to poor education outcomes. Children are also disadvantaged by skin infections, poor nutrition, loss of sleep, listlessness.

- i. responsible school governance;
    - ii. community priorities within traditional cultural practices;
    - iii. protocols to manage behaviour and attendance problems;
    - iv. realistic education targets.
  - g. Teachers can talk about the values and expectations of wider Australian society, and explain the rationale for accountability and for the equitable distribution and conservation of public resources;
  - h. Teachers can inspire their students to see school education as a path towards exciting life opportunities, towards meaningful employment and fulfilment in life both within their own communities – and in the wider society.
22. The teaching of Indigenous students must be recognized as a specialist skill, with a highly trained, professional, committed and appropriately remunerated workforce:
- a. Talented teachers should be especially recruited<sup>4</sup> and supported in specialised training programs;
  - b. Specialty training programs should be developed in partnership with senior Indigenous teachers and leaders, teachers of English as a second language, cross-cultural and behavioural experts, health experts, and sporting, music and art advisers.
  - c. Experienced and highly regarded teachers should mentor and support teachers in remote schools on a regular basis. This will help to minimize the loss of know-how through high rates of teacher turnover in remote schools, and also help to ensure that, at the very least, standards of literacy and numeracy pedagogy are maintained;
  - d. As soon as possible, specialist certification, based on skills in cross cultural communication, in team teaching approaches, in teaching English as a second language, and on special knowledge of Indigenous issues, should become a pre-requisite for teaching in remote Indigenous schools.
23. Indigenous teachers and teaching aides should be encouraged to stay in education and in community leadership roles, and receive financial incentives to upgrade their qualifications and for career development. There should be provision for their employment as:
- a. Teachers, mentors or principals in remote schools, and as role models to attract younger Indigenous people into education careers;
  - b. Leaders on school councils to advise on local curriculum and delivery options;
  - c. Community counsellors or consultants to support students and parents, to promote the importance of education, and to improve school attendance;
  - d. Contributors to specialty training programs for non-Indigenous teachers;

## **Ancillary educational resources**

24. Ancillary support for disadvantaged schools could also usefully come from a corps of volunteers (e.g. retired teachers or professionals with advanced qualifications and communication skills) prepared to work as aides or relief teachers. Such volunteers would need appropriate screening, an induction course, and an explicit agreement to govern their duties and to allow termination.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Teach for Australia concept provides a model for the recruitment of highly committed teachers, who could be specially prepared to teach in Aboriginal schools.

25. Educational programs, specially prepared for Indigenous communities, should be made available through free-to-air TV, video or by internet for use by teachers and parents<sup>5</sup>. Specific initiatives could include:
- a. A “Sesame Street” type program for pre-school children, to establish early skills in English, to prepare the way for school, and to start to explain some of the differences between Indigenous and mainstream culture;
  - b. Enrichment programs to support classroom teaching in specialist areas such as science, health and lifestyle-skills, sex-education, parenting skills, home maintenance, history, Indigenous languages, music and art;
  - c. Vocational awareness programs – designed to alert students to employment pathways and opportunities in medicine, science, law, business, community management, education, environment, music, art and sport;
  - d. Adult education programs to support ‘second chance’ education:
    - i. For those who never had the chance to go to school, and
    - ii. To help community leaders in acquiring the business and management skills needed to support community decision-making and school governance.

## **Awareness and expectations of parents, children and communities**

26. Expert cultural consultants, speaking the local language, should be employed in the school leadership team, to work with the school council and principal and to:
- a. Help parents to understand the importance of education, and to have higher expectations of their children;
  - b. Develop and implement strategies to provide emotional and practical support for parents and children in becoming “school ready”, ideally as a component of universal pre-school programs;
  - c. Encourage children to see the value of education, to support them in the early years when they first encounter the structured classroom environment, and in the middle years when estrangement from school begins to manifest;
  - d. Plan, implement and evaluate other targeted strategies (e.g. through incentive programs, “school dinners” or sport or music opportunities) to improve school attendance and student behaviour;
  - e. Identify young people who are struggling or otherwise at risk, and arrange counselling and support (such as specialist tuition out of hours) ;
  - f. Provide regular feedback to parents and carers on the educational progress of their child (e.g. using column graphs showing targets, and baseline, midyear and final results of literacy and numeracy and attendance rates.)
  - g. Help teachers to understand and respond to community aspirations and cultural priorities;
  - h. Mentor all teachers, monitor their attendance and performance, and provide them with relevant feedback from the community.
27. At the discretion of individual school councils, electronic record-keeping could be introduced to record the attendance of students and teachers, teaching hours taught, and student performance through regular assessments of literacy and numeracy. Records would be available to school councils, and to the parents and carers of individual students to inform governance.

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<sup>5</sup> Many suitable programs are already available through Imparja, ABC and SBS and other outlets and the Internet.

## School governance and community resources

28. School councils, comprising Indigenous leaders and parents, have a formal governing role in independent Aboriginal schools (e.g. in Western Australia), whereas in many other communities their role is advisory. Nevertheless, regardless of the exact legal situation<sup>6</sup>, there are many advantages in devolving more of the local planning and decision-making to school councils<sup>7</sup>. With the active involvement of leaders and parents, school councils would:
- a. Provide a forum for community engagement and consultation with the principal, other educators, and with government and departmental administrators;
  - b. Provide a locus for local planning in education and training:
    - i. to take account of community priorities and existing resources;
    - ii. to ensure mutual respect and two-way learning;
  - c. Make recommendations to government or make local decisions about:
    - i. local education and training programs;
    - ii. teaching appointments and terminations;
    - iii. flexible teaching arrangements and term times to ensure that teaching hours are not curtailed by “sorry business” and the “long dry” in northern Australia;
  - d. Use recognized processes and protocols to achieve goals for school attendance, literacy and numeracy outcomes, and cultural priorities;
  - e. Review attendance records, student behaviour, and literacy and numeracy results, and discuss appropriate responses for teachers, parents and students;
  - f. Report regularly on school performance and school-community collaborations;
  - g. Further develop their capacity for school governance by:
    - i. Seeking advice and participation from the private and philanthropic sectors on business and management practices;
    - ii. Arranging training in education and management protocols for council members;
    - iii. Arranging for clan responsibilities on the council to be delegated to individuals<sup>8</sup>, as appropriate, to reduce the size and frequency of meetings and to facilitate decision-making;
    - iv. Revising protocols, agreements and contracts so as to increase the local autonomy of the school council and principal.
29. School councils should be constituted to engage other agencies and to facilitate community leadership and cooperation in areas such as maternal and childhood health, sex education, family planning, reproductive health, preparation for parenthood, early childhood education, employment, art, sport, music, conservation of country, culture and language.
30. Whenever possible, school buildings should be designed and used as a “hub” to support a wider range of community activities (e.g. for arts and cultural centres, library services, and for music, sporting and other cultural events).

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<sup>6</sup> For example, although school councils in the NT negotiate Remote Area Learning Agreements with government, these are not legally binding on government, and some terms of the agreement or recommendations from school council are not followed. Furthermore, as the principal is an employee of government, he or she must be answerable to government.

<sup>7</sup> In *Radical Hope* Quarterly Essay 35, 2009, and recently in the Australian, Noel Pearson has canvassed the potential advantages and disadvantages of the “charter school” concept for Indigenous schools.

<sup>8</sup> There are 13 different clan groups represented on the Yirrkala School Council.

31. Over time, the administrative arrangements for education in remote communities should require:
- a. Community control of decision-making through the school council, including the control of line budget decisions;
  - b. Specialised academic training for the teaching work-force, and for the senior teachers who will provide mentorship and support;
  - c. Specialised academic input into curriculum development and assessment;
  - d. Formula-based funding by governments, direct to school councils, that takes account of the geographic and sociodemographic factors known to affect educational outcomes.
  - e. A transparent framework for governments and communities to achieve both financial and educational accountability.

## **Literacy, numeracy, bilingualism and biliteracy**

32. Teachers in remote schools need to use proven methods for teaching ESL, including the modelling of standard English.
- a. Choices about language development and pedagogy should be made within each community and supported by government
  - b. In those communities where the traditional language is strong, the “team teaching” model will involve local teachers and teaching aides, speaking the local language, working alongside well-trained teachers who are native speakers of English. Together they will deliver a bilingual approach in pre-school education and the early years of primary school to ensure that children are exposed to standard English at the earliest possible stage, while building on their knowledge of their traditional language.
  - c. In more urbanized or mixed language communities, where traditional languages may be faltering, local teachers will nevertheless play a key role in helping to maintain their own languages with individual children. However, in such circumstances, the early acquisition of standard English to supplement hybrid languages or creoles is a high priority.
33. Bilingual education in the early years provides a great opportunity for children to progress to biliteracy (i.e. reading and writing in their local language as well as in English). This will certainly be possible in those communities where the local language is maintained, and where there is strong support, from parents, community leaders and linguists to make grammatically deep teaching in both languages consistently available. The commitment to provide the necessary extra resources needs to be made at the political level.
34. Some critics have argued that the goal of English literacy will be compromised if substantial time is spent on achieving literacy in the traditional language, particularly if the resources and skills for teaching either language are inadequate.
35. However, if biliteracy has a high priority with the local community, and if the necessary teaching skills and resources in the traditional language are available, then the decision to proceed with a full biliteracy program should properly be made by the school council. Funding should then be provided by government for an initial period, with continuation funding to be subject to review of literacy outcomes in both languages.

36. Age-appropriate literacy materials with cultural and cross-cultural themes<sup>9</sup> should be developed for pre-school, primary and secondary levels by appropriate experts, working in partnership with community leaders.
37. Specially made TV programs/videos would be useful adjuncts in early childhood and primary education. Although it may be impracticable for complete programs to be made in all local languages, it should be possible to arrange for a local speaker of each language to record an introduction that would give a degree of 'local ownership' for programs made in English.

## **Preparing and retaining Indigenous students**

38. Younger Indigenous children, and their parents, need a great deal of support if the transition to school is to be successful. Investments in younger children, before they have fallen behind, will be most cost-effective. Important measures include:
  - a. Comprehensive programs of maternal and child health (MCH), including education for mothers, to minimize the developmental delays that can accumulate through poor nutrition, infection, chronic stress or neglect;
  - b. Pre-school education for children, linked to both MCH, mothers' groups and play groups and primary school services, that will prepare children to connect with English and their new school environment;
  - c. Counselling to build parenting skills and to support families before and during the transition to school;
  - d. Education programs for pre-school and the early years of primary school, developed by national experts in consultation with Indigenous teachers, that are designed to capture the interest and attention of children, and to fire a life-long love of learning;
  - e. The provision of regular, nutritious meals for children in pre-school and the early years of primary school.
39. Older Indigenous children and adolescents can be encouraged to stay in education by:
  - a. Helping teachers to acquire the communication and performance skills that will engage the attention of students, and minimise behaviour problems in class;
  - b. Helping teachers to acquire the negotiation skills to manage attendance and behaviour problems through measures such as:
    - i. Rewards for regular attendance and good behaviour: e.g. class excursions;
    - ii. Withdrawal of privileges for poor attendance or behaviour: e.g. access to swimming pool, football;
  - c. Linking school attendance to opportunities in sport, art, music, and conservation of land and culture<sup>10</sup>.
  - d. Teaching practical skills that are likely to be useful to young people (e.g. sex education, family planning, child-care, home and car maintenance)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> As circumstances allow, dual language resources would be developed for communities with biliteracy programs.

<sup>10</sup> There is anecdotal evidence that the Clontarf scheme linked to football has had success in promoting attendance for Indigenous students in mainstream schools. Some communities with swimming pools have been able, with some success, to make school attendance a condition for access to the pool.

<sup>11</sup> Although such opportunities can be introduced as school-based VET offerings, it should not be assumed that all students are destined for a VET pathway to employment. Students from remote schools should also be encouraged to think about career options requiring higher education.

- e. Allowing “after hours” access to school resources, buildings and advice, so that students have a place, and more of an incentive, for “homework” and self-learning;
- f. Providing troubled students with access to expert Indigenous counsellors, and by facilitating their entry into remedial or homelands programs;
- g. Providing flexible term-times and teaching arrangements such as “wet-season” school to maximize opportunities for school attendance;
- h. Consistent follow-up with families when children are absent from school and prosecution of parents of absent children as a last resort.

## Approaches to secondary education

40. Secondary education for Indigenous students from remote Australia faces many problems. Outcomes suffer because of poor primary education, attendance and behaviour problems, teacher turnover, limitations of available courses, diseconomies of scale and other inefficiencies. The way forward should include:
- a. The introduction of specialist training for teachers;
  - b. The introduction of IT and media resources, specially designed for Indigenous students, to help them understand the existential complexities of living between two cultures, and to explain the employment and career opportunities that flow from education;
  - c. A rigorous evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of recent experiences. e.g.
    - i. Secondary schools in the homelands have been hard to establish and support with a critical mass of students and quality teachers. The planned boarding facility for East Arnhem Land will be on the homelands and not in town – at present students go to secondary school in one of the homeland centres for 3 days a week and then fly home.
    - ii. Another boarding school in homelands (Tiwi College on Melville Is) is expensive, with low enrolments, limited subject choices, difficulties in providing activities all day every day of the week, and poor outcomes.
    - iii. It is suggested that behaviour problems are particularly bad if all the students come from a single language group, if the home community is not far away, and if school and leisure activities for school boarders are not well-planned;
    - iv. Boarding schools in Darwin and other regional centres have also had limited success; expectations and outcomes for Aboriginal students have been less than for mainstream students at the same schools;
    - v. Students with strong family support, and those who are “cherry-picked” to attend are likely to do better in boarding school;
    - vi. Larger and better supported facilities with a critical mass of students (e.g. 150-200), are more likely to succeed;
    - vii. Boarding schools “down south” have had more success in some circumstances, possibly because Indigenous students are immersed in a new peer group that places a greater value on learning. However, improved learning and socialization in such schools has to be traded-off against loneliness, and the potential loss of community connection and values;
    - viii. Most Indigenous students of secondary age need individual support in class; it is resource intensive to meet these special needs, regardless of the type of school;

- d. Planning to identify and evaluate strategies that would make secondary education more attractive to Indigenous families and children, particularly those families where parents are themselves poorly educated;
- e. Further exploration of policy options:
  - i. Funding formulae for secondary schooling that allow for the lifetime cost of a person not being adequately educated;
  - ii. Specialty training in boarding school management;
  - iii. Partnering of “down-south” schools with Indigenous community schools<sup>12</sup>, to provide support and role models through short-term exchanges of both teachers and students;
  - iv. Greater involvement of the private sector in providing work experience and role models for students in the early years of secondary school, in advising and supporting the development of VET courses, and in providing job opportunities;
  - v. Evaluation of the “orbiting” option for young Indigenous people, whereby they are educated and work outside their home community for extended periods, while regularly returning to country to maintain family and cultural links;
  - vi. Greater flexibility with ABSTUDY funding – essentially a voucher system that helps to provide educational choice for Indigenous parents.

## **Support for Indigenous students in mainstream schools**

41. Teaching of Indigenous students in mainstream schools should be supported through:
- a. Education courses for all trainee teachers that include:
    - i. Aboriginal Studies courses;
    - ii. Particular emphasis on literacy training;
    - iii. Advice about linkages between school and community;
  - b. Continued mentoring and support for new teachers, particularly from literacy experts;
  - c. Delivery of Aboriginal Studies programs to promote cross-cultural understanding, to minimize bias against Indigenous students, to identify positive Indigenous role models, and to build student self-esteem;
  - d. Promotion of high aspirations for Indigenous students and provision of positive support for parents;
  - e. Specialist programs and visits from local professionals to promote awareness of vocational and professional opportunities;
  - f. Flexible programs to meet the needs of Indigenous students without the assumption that they should all be streamed in special classes and into VET courses;
  - g. Remedial support (in class) for students who have fallen behind; such programs could involve classmate mentors or buddies, volunteer classroom aides, as well as specialist remedial teachers.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Wesley College in Melbourne has an ongoing partnership with the community at Fitzroy Crossing in WA.

## Job opportunities and vocational and professional training

42. With better education, Aboriginal people in remote communities would be better qualified to fill local jobs that are currently filled by non-Aboriginal people, as well as new jobs that will help to preserve their culture and country<sup>13</sup>, and other jobs in the outside world.
43. Unfortunately, with the winding-back of CDEP, the new shire arrangements in the NT, and the intervention, there has been a net negative impact on Indigenous enterprises and employment opportunities.
44. Furthermore, some non-Indigenous decision-makers are still reluctant to create jobs or to appoint Indigenous people to positions for which they are well qualified. All non-Indigenous people, regardless of whether they are working in service delivery, should be assisted to confront and overcome their implicit prejudices, and to actively seek to promote the supply of jobs for Indigenous people.
45. Of course, in the current welfare environment, education also needs to play a role to increase the Indigenous demand for employment. Young people need help to understand why they should bother to get educated, and once educated, why they should look for and take a job.
  - a. Enthusiastic teachers, even those teaching very young children, should take every opportunity to point to Indigenous role models who have succeeded in life, whether in football, art or in public life, in a trade, or in a profession such as teaching or medicine.
  - b. The life stories of non-Indigenous role models should also be discussed, to help acquaint children with the expectations and possibilities for achievement and enrichment of lives in the wider world.
  - c. Above all, students should be encouraged to aim high in the classroom, and to see that as a stepping-stone to a life of employment and fulfilment.
46. The opportunity to partner with schools “down south”, allows Indigenous students to experience the wider world and see the benefits that can flow from education; this will facilitate more informed decision-making about educational choices and future careers.
47. By the time an Indigenous student reaches secondary school, the discussion of potential career paths and job opportunities will become more focused. Each individual must be offered choices, in accordance with the following principles:
  - a. Indigenous students should be assessed by the same criteria as other students;
  - b. If a student has not hitherto been a high academic achiever, the usual option would be to direct him or her into vocational training (VET);

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<sup>13</sup> There would be cost-savings as well as productivity gains if the funds presently spent on Aboriginal welfare, social support and the criminal justice system could be diverted into ‘positive’ purposes that are education and employment-related. See: Boyd Hunter *AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF LABOUR ECONOMICS* 10(3) 185 – 202, 2007. Productivity Commission <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/indigenous/keyindicators2009>

- c. However, if a student expresses interest in a profession, that option should not be closed off prematurely<sup>14</sup>. Appropriate mentoring or work experience in a sympathetic environment may help students to develop the confidence to support the academic effort needed for entry to university. Bridging programs can also play a key role.
48. Government and private sector contracts with Indigenous communities should incorporate obligations (with specified funding and time allowances) to provide work experience, training or job opportunities for Indigenous people in those communities.
49. Through remote partnership agreements in the NT, some communities<sup>15</sup> have been able to employ workplace coordinators of secondary education and VET opportunities. These positions are best placed as close to students as possible.
50. Northern Territory government is already in discussions to develop partnerships with industry to support post-school employment, and developing a “birth to jobs” concept for education in consultation with five Aboriginal communities.

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<sup>14</sup> National curriculum may make academic options less available and more Indigenous students will do Certificate II and III courses, equivalent in value in AQF but narrower educationally than year 12.

<sup>15</sup> At Yirkala, there have been successful apprenticeships, and graduates have been placed in health, education and other positions.

## *Discussion of issues*

### **Focus of this report**

Most Australians are now aware that poor education has exacerbated the social disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and limited the life opportunities for their children. This is a problem throughout Australia, where the majority of Indigenous children attend mainstream schools. However, at least since the time of the Collins Report<sup>16</sup>, it has been recognised that the crisis in education is worse in many remote communities in the Northern Territory<sup>17</sup> and other parts of outback Australia, where educational outcomes may even have deteriorated in recent generations. Indeed, many elders educated in mission schools during the era of paternalism are now very worried about the poor literacy of their grandchildren. The concerns about education and social dysfunction have now been reinforced by the growing awareness of child neglect and child abuse in many Indigenous communities, particularly in the Northern Territory, as highlighted in the recent Bath report<sup>18</sup>.

In the longer-term, these social problems can only be solved if Indigenous people themselves, through education, have acquired the knowledge and the power to find their own solutions<sup>19</sup>. Accordingly, this workshop report has a major focus on the educational issues for communities in northern and remote Australia, while acknowledging that somewhat similar issues need to be faced for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students attending mainstream schools across Australia.

The issues to be addressed by the education system are those of cross-cultural expectations and understanding, as well as those of literacy and numeracy. This is necessary because many Indigenous people in remote communities are unaware of the basics of the Western economy, and the expectations that apply in mainstream society. Many lack the knowledge, skills and opportunities that would be needed to find employment, and to solve the social, health and lifestyle problems currently facing them and their communities<sup>20</sup>. Ultimately, these present-day problems can all be traced back to the historical impacts of white settlement in destroying traditional Aboriginal society<sup>21</sup>, compounded in recent years by discrimination, poor policy, inadequate education, welfare dependence and substance abuse. Unfortunately, these pressing social problems will only be finally solved when Indigenous people have acquired the knowledge that is needed to negotiate on more equal terms with mainstream Australia, and to manage their own affairs.

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<sup>16</sup> Collins, R. (1999). *Learning the lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*. Darwin

<sup>17</sup> NAPLAN results show that educational outcomes for Indigenous students are much worse in the NT than in other jurisdictions. 69% of year three Indigenous students in the NT score below the minimum standard; outcomes are worse again for those in bush schools. See Commonwealth of Australia. Prime Minister's Report. Closing the Gap., 2010. Also Hughes, H & Hughes, M. *Indigenous Education 2010*. The Centre for Independent Studies. Policy Monograph 110.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2010/pages/bath\\_inquiry\\_nt\\_child\\_protection\\_system\\_18oct10.aspx](http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2010/pages/bath_inquiry_nt_child_protection_system_18oct10.aspx)

<sup>19</sup> Societies are successful when their citizens have respect for each other and for the law; without that support, the efforts of police and social workers will often be ineffectual.

<sup>20</sup> The social problems have been well documented for many years, most recently by Nicolas Rothwell and others in the *Australian* newspaper eg May 8, 2010, *And they call it failure to thrive*. For a more academic overview, see Sutton, P. *The politics of suffering. Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus*. Melbourne University Press, 2009 – which cites numerous primary articles.

<sup>21</sup> Perkins R, Langton M. (editors) *First Australians – an illustrated history*. Miegunyah Press, 2008.

For some years, education systems have been ill-equipped to teach useful knowledge and survival skills relevant to hygiene, nutrition, basic economics, and civic responsibility to Indigenous children.

This educational impasse has trapped many remote area Indigenous people in an unsatisfactory transitional world without the knowledge and skills to thrive in either traditional or mainstream culture. Educational reform is needed to develop and impart the expectations and survival skills, and the literacy and numeracy that will help Indigenous Australians to take meaningful control of their lives, to engage on a more equal basis with mainstream Australia and to see the opportunities on offer.

These challenges have already been discussed by a number of Indigenous organisations, advocates and educators<sup>22</sup> and by government<sup>23</sup>. However, the changes that need to be implemented nationally have many implications for teacher recruitment and training, curricula and classroom practice, as well as for school resourcing, school governance and community control.

## **Understanding social and educational changes in Indigenous communities**

Traditional Indigenous communities cannot be quarantined from the influences of the wider world, nor can traditional life be completely restored<sup>24</sup>. Aboriginal people of today need to be educated in western ways so that they are able to “walk in both worlds”, and help themselves to solve their social and existential problems.

To understand the educational failures of recent generations, we need to understand the historical consequences of differing cultural expectations and traditions, the stresses on traditional Aboriginal people in their rapidly changing world, the changing attitudes towards Aboriginal issues in the wider community, and the inconsistencies of education policy and practice for Aboriginal children.

In the paternalistic era, education was accepted by those in authority as the pathway towards a better life for Aboriginal children, and the tensions between the expectations of traditional and western culture were explicitly recognized<sup>25</sup>. In that era, many children were taken away from traditional communities, ostensibly for their “own protection”<sup>26</sup>. Of those taken away, some who were fortunate enough to benefit from a good education were later to become the Aboriginal leaders of their generation. Others were badly treated or abused in institutions, or brought up in adoptive families without any contact with parents, siblings or Aboriginal culture<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Tiwi Education Board. [http://www.tiwilandcouncil.net.au/WhatsBH/Whats\\_BH\\_frame\\_edu.htm](http://www.tiwilandcouncil.net.au/WhatsBH/Whats_BH_frame_edu.htm)  
Langton, M & Rhea, ZM. *Indigenous Education & the ladder to prosperity*. In Perspectives  
Pearson, N (2009) *Radical hope – education & equality in Australia*. Quarterly Essay 35.  
Sarra C. 2010, Indigenous Education Leadership Institute. Various papers

<sup>23</sup> Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-4 - [www.mceecdya.edu.au](http://www.mceecdya.edu.au)

<sup>24</sup> This account is most relevant for the Northern Territory, but experiences have been similar in many parts of remote Australia.

<sup>25</sup> Hasluck, Paul. *Shades of Darkness, Aboriginal Affairs 1925–1965*, Melbourne University Press, 1988

<sup>26</sup> Children of mixed descent were most often taken away – some were thought to be at risk of sexual abuse, but a principal motivation was to break their links with traditional culture and language, to teach them English, to provide an underpaid labour force and to eventually assimilate them into mainstream culture, albeit as an underclass.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission – *Bringing them home report*. Canberra, 2007.  
[http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/bth\\_report/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/index.html)

Children who stayed with their birth mothers in remote communities often had access to education in paternalistic mission schools; this provided basic literacy and numeracy, some understanding of the western economy and a leavening of religious values. However, after paternalism faded in the 1970s and 1980s, school attendances fell away<sup>28</sup>, both in the new government schools, and in the mission schools that survived into the new era. The relevance of schooling was questioned, not only by children, but also by some parents and by some in government. School attendance for Indigenous children became discretionary, perhaps because of misapplied cultural sensitivity or continuing discrimination, and because it was almost impossible to enforce. Schools were poorly resourced, teaching standards declined and children were effectively free to choose for themselves. Like disenfranchised young people the world over, many of them rejected not only school, but also the traditional authority of their community elders, drifting into rebellious behaviour, petrol sniffing and other forms of substance abuse, early sexuality and later into alcoholism. Teenage pregnancy and male incarceration became the norm, and gambling became embedded as an accepted way of redistributing income in a welfare economy. With poor education, a confused moral compass, rising birth-rates, overcrowding, and unemployment, pressures from heavy policing and white appropriation, and lack of access to many essential services, it was inevitable that violence and abuse of children<sup>29</sup> would be compounded by the high rates of alcohol abuse, and that housing, cars, and other assets would be destroyed or poorly maintained in many remote communities. This dire picture is not the universal experience of all families, but it is a picture that all families would be familiar with, even if only vicariously.

Although the paternalistic model for Aboriginal affairs was abandoned with the best of intentions, governments have hitherto failed to develop an alternative education model that could reliably empower Aboriginal people in remote Australia with the knowledge and skills to preserve the best aspects of their culture, to manage their lives, solve their social and health problems, and to play a recognisably productive role in the future of their country. Poor educational outcomes in remote Australia have thus exacerbated the effects of passive welfare, and the health<sup>30</sup> and social problems arising from systemic disadvantage, overcrowded housing, poor diet, unemployment, substance abuse<sup>31</sup> and violence.

These recent difficulties for remote communities have been driven by their fraught interactions with the outside world, resulting in their loss of free access to traditional lands, the loss of rural employment opportunities, and a dependence on government funding.

Jobs were lost following the equal pay decision, and as the Australian economy moved away from rural production. In later years, as Indigenous rights were given more recognition and as funds began to flow to Aboriginal organizations and communities, both through welfare and as part compensation for land appropriation, there was a back-lash which exacerbated discrimination in

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<sup>28</sup> School attendance in the era of paternalism was often linked with community feeding programs, so that if attendance was poor, whole communities could go hungry.

<sup>29</sup> The public recognition of sexual abuse provided the trigger for the Northern Territory intervention. See Anderson, Pat & Rex Wild. *Ampe akelyernemane meke mekarle. 'Little children are sacred'*. Northern Territory Government, Darwin, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Health problems have been well documented – see for example: Mathews JD *The Menzies School of Health Research offers a new paradigm of cooperative research. Med J Aust* 1998 Dec 7-21; 169(11-12) : 625-9, and websites such as [www.menzies.edu.au](http://www.menzies.edu.au) & [www.ichr.uwa.edu.au](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au) . The new Lowitja Institute, an Indigenous research organisation, has a very informative website at [www.lowitja.org.au](http://www.lowitja.org.au). Progress reports on Indigenous health outcomes are updated for AIHW at [www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au](http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au).

<sup>31</sup> Brady M. *First taste: How Indigenous Australians learned about Grog.* (6 parts). The Australian Education and Rehabilitation Foundation. Canberra, 2008.

parts of the bureaucracy and the wider community, making it more difficult to negotiate necessary reforms.

Financial management has also been contentious. Communities without business skills were always at risk of exploitation by unscrupulous advisers and store-managers, and although the rise of community-controlled organisations minimised these financial risks, they have not been entirely eliminated. Furthermore, through ignorance, maladministration, malfeasance, or criminality, some funds have been siphoned off or wasted within governments, in communities or in Indigenous organizations. More recently, with the wider recognition of the need for cross-cultural consultation, funds have also leaked away through highly-paid consultants, and through uncoordinated travel by bureaucrats from multiple agencies to the same remote communities. These problems, together with the lack of job opportunities, help to explain why poverty is ubiquitous in remote communities to this day.

In struggling communities, the burden of community decision-making and responses on education and health issues has fallen increasingly upon a small cadre of overworked older women<sup>32</sup>, who have had the insight and concern to respond to the crises about them, but have often lacked the power to implement solutions. Community decision-makers, including those in community-controlled organizations<sup>33</sup>, have had to balance traditional community lifestyle and values against the values, threats and opportunities of mainstream culture.

The homelands movement has emphasized the advantages of living “in country”, with the opportunity to reaffirm traditional values and skills and to minimize the threats from overcrowding, petrol sniffing and alcohol. Unfortunately, although the return to small homeland communities has had many advantages, it has introduced major diseconomies of scale into the provision of education and other essential services, and thus reduced life opportunities for children. The Indigenous estate has dwindled and become ecologically threatened, and the increasing dependence on the cash economy, vehicles and store food is unlikely to ever be reversed. It is to be hoped that communities will continue to use their homeland connections as a stabilizing influence, while negotiating a rapprochement with mainstream culture that will provide new opportunities for their children while protecting them from substance abuse and violence. Unfortunately, the problems of substance abuse have now been transported to some homeland communities.

The conclusion seems to be that remote communities cannot return to an idealized past, as the effects of white occupation cannot be reversed. Indigenous people in remote communities need continuing educational help to make the best use of mainstream culture, to preserve the best of their traditional culture, and to provide their children with opportunity and hope. Moreover, we should also note that the issues for Aboriginal education must be resolved against the background of recent changes in attitudes to education in Australian society as a whole.

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<sup>32</sup> This is partly because health and education of young children are seen as “women’s business”, and partly because the cohort of capable men has been depleted by alcohol and death in many communities.

<sup>33</sup> Community-controlled health organisations have been active since the 1970s, in a reaction to the failure of government services. Community-control of education, as in remote WA, in parts of north Queensland and in Yirrkala in the NT, has been slower to develop.

## **Influences on mainstream education**

### **Social and educational changes over time**

When universal education was introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in mainstream Australia, teachers were seen as having an implicit role as social reformers – in helping the children of the working class to not only achieve literacy and numeracy, but to also inculcate the habits of hygiene, thrift and the behaviours that would help them to become good employees and to lead healthier and productive lives. By the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that broader social role for education had become less necessary because with universal education of parents, most children of mainstream families could learn the personal and social skills they needed within the home, even before they went to school.

However, from the 1960s and 1970s, attitudes and behaviours were to change even more within the teaching profession, as within the wider Australian community<sup>34</sup>. Discipline was progressively relaxed, both at school and at home – and children were encouraged to be free and to test the boundaries. Peer groups of young people set values and expectations that were increasingly driven by the ideas of freedom<sup>35</sup>, and by youth and celebrity culture and advertising, rather than by parents. Classroom behaviour and education outcomes were seen to deteriorate, particularly for boys from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Those who were most vulnerable were at risk through violent behaviour and drug abuse as young adults. By the 1990s, social problems amongst the disadvantaged were compounding for the next generation as the troubled young became parents in their turn. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with increasing affluence, alcohol had become central to the new nightclub culture, with incidents of violence affecting young people from most parts of society.

### **Challenges for parents and teachers**

There have also been changes in the teaching profession. Because of deteriorating classroom behaviour in some schools, and competition from other professions, it has become more difficult to attract high quality graduates<sup>36</sup>, and retain them in teaching. Changes in educational theory have led to changes in values and teaching practice, with a questioning of earlier academic standards and canons of knowledge, and a new emphasis on discovery, and on student-directed learning and freedom to choose. These developments have been welcome in many ways, yet from at least the time of John Stuart Mill, and as recently popularized by Malcolm Gladwell, it has been well known that guidance, practice and repetition are needed to become proficient in a new skill and to become successful in life<sup>37</sup>. While repetition alone is not a guarantee of educational success it is

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<sup>34</sup> Edgar, Don & Patricia. *The new child – in search of smarter grown-ups*. Wilkinson Publishing, Melbourne, 2008. These authors point out both the benefits and the risks for young children that have followed the recent generational changes in Australian society.

<sup>35</sup> As children grew-up they were exposed to pop-culture, and later to the sexual revolution. By the 1970s “The Little Red School-book” had appeared to epitomise the influence of the leftist youth culture around the world, and to mark the Cultural Revolution in China. These influences, in a period of rapid social and economic change in an increasingly secular society, had a particularly deep impact on Australian culture, Australian families and the education system.

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, one University once thought about attracting students to its teacher training courses by advertising them as requiring the “lowest cut-off scores in Australia”. Throughout Australia, in an era when classroom behaviour has deteriorated, the better-paid professions, now open to women and to men from all social backgrounds, have absorbed many able people who might otherwise have had a vocation for teaching.

<sup>37</sup> Gladwell, M : *Outliers – The story of success*. He reminds us that for many, it now seems much more acceptable to practice for sport or music, or even texting, than to practice reading or mathematics.

nevertheless still accepted as a vital tool in a teacher's toolbox. The skill of the successful teacher is in drawing from these different philosophies of teaching so that all students can be excited, challenged, and fulfilled by their classroom opportunities<sup>38</sup>.

The challenge for Australian society is to support parents and teachers in seizing back the initiative, and in providing leadership about values, behaviour and learning. If we can capture the imagination of our young people, particularly those from disadvantaged circumstances, society will be more able to help them acquire the skills needed to better manage their lives and to help themselves, their families and their communities to a better future.

## **Impacts of new technology**

Information technology is underpinning the next revolution in education, but it will not remove the need for dedicated and enthusiastic teachers. Teachers will help children to acquire literacy and numeracy and the skills needed for active citizenship, and then guide them as they acquire the critical skills that they need to be selective in their paths of self-learning, to evaluate the flood of digital information from the internet, and to convert information into knowledge and wisdom.

## **Matters of specific relevance for Indigenous education**

### **The importance of early life experiences**

A wealth of research, both in Australia and overseas, shows that a child's educational success depends upon good health, and an early start in a supportive and nurturing environment.

Many Aboriginal children in remote communities are disadvantaged even before going to school, and indeed before birth. There is an increased risk of intra-uterine growth retardation and low birth-weight because of maternal infections, poor nutrition and smoking, and of brain damage from foetal alcohol syndrome if the mother is a heavy drinker. The burden from poor nutrition and infection often continues in early childhood<sup>39</sup>, leading to listlessness, impaired growth and decreased capacity to learn. Children of pre-school age are rarely read to in remote communities, and too few are exposed to formal early learning experiences and knowledge of the wider world that would help to prepare them for school.

Scientific understanding of early childhood development has undergone a paradigm shift over the last decade. We now know how *nature* (our inheritance) and *nurture* (our experiences) interact in the early months and years of life to 'sculpt' the architecture of the developing brain. The brain grows from one quarter of adult size at birth to around two-thirds of adult brain size at age 3 years. It is therefore of critical importance to provide the best possible nurturing environment in these early years. This developmental period also coincides with the growth of cognitive, language, emotional and social skills, marking the time when the developing brain is most amenable to influences, either positive or negative, in the child-rearing environment. This research on early development is now so compelling that many economists, including Nobel Laureate James Heckman,

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<sup>38</sup> In PNG and other developing countries, education is a privilege rather than a universal right, and facilities are very poor. Nevertheless, children and teachers enjoy learning in traditional ways in the classroom together; they can't afford to be distracted by discussions about educational theory.

<sup>39</sup> There may be few regular meals, and some children of pre-school age survive by cadging money from relatives to buy coke and chips from the local store.

believe that interventions to improve the development of young children are the most cost-effective investments that can ever be made in human capital. Heckman<sup>40</sup> concludes that “a major refocus of policy is required to capitalize on knowledge about the life cycle of skill and health formation and the importance of the early years in creating inequality and in producing skills for the workforce”.

This international perspective reinforces the view that Indigenous education outcomes are likely to be affected by adversity in early life, and that the solutions must be found from outside as well as inside the classroom. Our society must ensure that Indigenous children have the same opportunities as other Australian children to develop and acquire pre-literacy skills in the home and in other child care settings. This will require reinvigoration of maternal and child health programs, as well as proactive family parenting support and innovative pre-school and primary education programs.

## **Changing attitudes and perspectives**

In the era of paternalism, education was seen by government as the pathway to free Aboriginal children from their cultural roots and to assimilate them into Australian society. Subsequently, with the recognition of Aboriginal rights, the importance of maintaining traditional culture was reaffirmed. Indeed, in some quarters, traditional culture came to be idealized, and Western influences to be demonized. Such an Arcadian view led some individuals to conclude that Aboriginal society should be protected from mainstream influences whenever possible. The “back to homelands” movement, exemplifying this principle, has certainly had some success in reducing the negative influences from substance abuse, violence and disease, but it is unrealistic to suppose that traditional culture can be restored to its original state; the more limited and achievable objective should be to come to an accommodation with mainstream culture and education, to preserve the best aspects of traditional culture, and to provide new opportunities for young Aboriginal people in future generations.

## **Cross-cultural agendas and insights for decision-makers**

A significant challenge for all non-Aboriginal people is to be aware always of the tacit cultural agendas that they bring, and to have insight into how these agendas can impact on Aboriginal people, and how they can be explicitly identified and communicated in cross-cultural conversations. Nevertheless, to better solve the many challenges facing Aboriginal education and training for those in remote communities, authorities could benefit greatly from accessing the expertise of informed educators<sup>41</sup> and teachers, administrators<sup>42</sup>, health experts, anthropologists and linguists, and pastoralists<sup>43</sup>, missionaries and others who have

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<sup>40</sup> Heckman, J.J. (2008) *Schools, Skills and Synapses*. IZA Discussion Paper No. 3515. Bonn, Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA). (Available on line at: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp3515.pdf>)

<sup>41</sup> The *Sarra Report* has already made an important contribution to the reform of Indigenous education policy in the Northern Territory, and the initiatives of Noel Pearson have had major impact nationally.

<sup>42</sup> Egan, T. *Due inheritance – reviving the cultural and economic wellbeing of first Australians*. Niblock publishing, Northern Territory, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> One story can serve to illustrate how valuable expertise has often been ignored by authorities. The son of a white pastoral family in Central Australia grew up with local Aboriginal boys as playmates and learnt much about their language and customs. After going away to school and university, he came back as an adult to manage the property. There was mutual trust between his family and local Aboriginal people, and the pastoralist used his language skills to understand the local people, to support them in adjusting to changing social circumstances, and to provide training and job opportunities for the young men. Yet when he

had first hand experience of working between the cultures. Their knowledge and experience could usefully supplement the experience of Aboriginal leaders and parents and community-controlled organizations.

## **Paths and attitudes to knowledge**

Differences in attitudes to knowledge between traditional and western cultures, while not widely recognized, have perhaps had a negative impact on communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. At least since the enlightenment and the rise of science, the scientific world, and the western world more generally, has regarded most knowledge as a public good, to be shared freely through education and publication, and more recently through the internet. In contrast, in traditional communities, some knowledge is likely to be regarded as secret, to be passed on at the right time to people of the appropriate seniority (e.g. after initiations) or with the right to know<sup>44</sup>. One consequence of this is that Aboriginal people sometimes still speak of “secret whitefella knowledge”, with the implication that specific knowledge, or the tacit agenda of the “whitefella”, is being deliberately withheld. This may often have been the case in past years when discrimination was more overt<sup>45</sup>. However, in contemporary times, cross-cultural communication is most likely to fail simply because non-Indigenous people are so unaware of the deep gulf in implicit knowledge and tacit understanding between the cultures that they have failed to articulate the full story.

## **Language, culture and communication**

Traditional languages are spoken in many remote communities in Australia, with English as a second, third or fourth language in multilingual societies. Languages are not fixed and are constantly changing. However, in some communities, where the parents have different traditional languages, children and adults may communicate in creoles based on elements from traditional languages and (Aboriginal) English.

Furthermore, some educated Aboriginal adults from traditional communities still refer to the “secret English” spoken by educated white people, as they realize that they do not understand language used to refer to mainstream business and culture<sup>46</sup>. This gap in language and meaning between the cultures can impair communication. It seems likely therefore that some of the past effort on well-intentioned consultation with traditional Aboriginal communities<sup>47</sup> has been ineffective because of continuing difficulties with communication and meaning between parties embedded in different

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approached the vocational training authorities in Alice Springs for advice about how he might support their Aboriginal training initiatives, he could not get a hearing.

<sup>44</sup> As was also the case with the craft guilds in mediaeval Europe, and of course is still the case with patent protection in the modern world.

<sup>45</sup> Or even today with government bureaucracies, which protect much of their information from the public!

<sup>46</sup> This does not reflect on the capacity of Aboriginal people to learn – it simply reflects the fact that many linguistic concepts are embedded in a culture, and when people haven’t lived in that culture, they cannot be expected to understand the concept, particularly when there no words in their own language that approximate to the foreign concept. See: Wierzbicka, Anna. *English : meaning and culture*. Oxford University Press, 2006. To compound the problems of practical communication, Aboriginal people can learn a word, and use it in the correct context, but without understanding the meaning – this would apply often to concepts that arise in finance or business. See: Richard Trudgen – *Why warriors lie down and die*. Aboriginal Resource and Development Services. Darwin, 2001. [www.whywarriors.com.au/products.php](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/products.php)

<sup>47</sup> Aboriginal people who were removed as children from traditional communities have usually lost their traditional language, but because of their affinity with the culture, they are better able to help with communication than people from a purely mainstream background.

cultures. Even today, there are very few people who have lived sufficiently in both cultures to be proficient in both English and a traditional language, and with the knowledge from both cultures that is needed to explain complex concepts across the cultural interface.

## **Preservation of traditional languages**

Aboriginal languages that survive are acquired naturally by children<sup>48</sup>, although modifications from English or creoles can be frequent. As the years go by, in many communities the number of fluent speakers of the traditional language is declining. Fortunately, in some communities, a proportion of traditional people are also literate in the language that they speak, having been taught to read and write it using scripts developed during mission days or by academic linguists working in partnership with community informants. The availability of written material in a traditional language, whether in translations of the Bible<sup>49</sup> or as traditional stories, can help to preserve the spoken language, and affirm the importance of traditional culture and values for children.

## **Teaching in remote Indigenous schools - biliteracy and bilingualism**

A bilingual approach to teaching is important to learning for Indigenous children, as the traditional spoken language is a vehicle for cognitive development and as the stepping stone to the learning of other languages such as English. The current policy in the NT requires compulsory teaching in English for the first four hours of the day and precludes the teaching of curriculum content in an Indigenous language or teaching of an Indigenous language in that time. A practical consequence is that there is little time in the afternoon, after the first four hours of school, to teach the Indigenous language, or to use it for teaching other content.

Indeed, there is no consensus about whether schools should teach biliteracy (i.e. the ability to be fluent in reading and writing of both languages), or whether, because of the extra work load for teachers and students, the main goal should be literacy in English<sup>50</sup>. Certainly, if biliteracy is seen as a high priority by a particular language group or community, a successful program would require substantially increased resources, together with support from academic linguists, as well as the local community.

There is currently a policy vacuum on this matter. Effectively, the biliteracy option is open to negotiation at particular schools in the Northern Territory. However, without the necessary resources, remote schools cannot maintain the services of the assistant teachers and recruit the community members needed to support a successful program of biliteracy and cultural education.

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<sup>48</sup> Young children have a great capacity to learn to speak new languages – so that they can readily learn good English as well as their traditional language. In mixed language communities, it is usually the children who invent the creoles and pidgin languages that emerge.

<sup>49</sup> Traditional languages have often been preserved in written form by linguists working for SIL and other religious groups.

<sup>50</sup> Biliteracy will be resource intensive and difficult to achieve without local teachers who are themselves literate in their language, or if the language has not been written down and recorded. Biliteracy would thus be easier to achieve with those languages (e.g. Yolngu in Yirrkala) which have a well developed orthography (writing script and system) and qualified bilingual and bicultural teachers.

## **Aboriginal studies programs**

Although schools should play an important role in conserving the stories and values of traditional Aboriginal society, there is a view that in remote schools, cultural studies programs devised by non-local teachers have sometimes been simplistic, not provided cultural knowledge beyond what the children already knew, and taken time away from other learning. Well-designed programs, with genuine local content of language and culture, have been more difficult to develop and maintain within resources available to remote schools<sup>51</sup>.

Generic Aboriginal studies programs in mainstream schools<sup>52</sup> are very important in affirming the cultural identity of Aboriginal students, in increasing the historical knowledge and cultural awareness of all students, and in minimizing discrimination.

## **Community tensions, strengths, role models and opportunities**

Young people in remote communities are negotiating life between two cultures. Most recently, social networking technology, pervasive in many communities, is having profound effects on the social interactions, groupings, attitudes and values of young people, while the related digital technologies have yet to be fully exploited as agents of educational change.

However, over recent generations, many young people in remote communities have also rejected the authority of elders<sup>53</sup>, leading to a breakdown of traditional values, initiation rites and paths to cultural knowledge, but often without the leavening influence that would have followed from a knowledge and acceptance of mainstream values. Vulnerable individuals have been caught-up in petrol sniffing, gunja use, alcohol abuse, violence, and in sexual liaisons that cut across accepted skin-groups. The situation is complicated by TV and videos from mainstream Australia that often feature the lowest common denominators of celebrity culture, violence or pornography. For a considerable number of young Aboriginal men, their direct experience of mainstream culture is through a term in prison.

Against this tide of confusion and uncertainty, young people can nevertheless look for positive role models amongst Aboriginal people who have achieved in sport, and in art, in conservation of country and tourism, in law and education, and in other vocations. Yet there is much to be done to promote a broader sense of self-respect and two-way responsibility to help young Aboriginal people to deal with the existential crises<sup>54</sup> facing them and their communities. In respecting the traditional culture, educators can help students to understand their implicit obligation to preserve it. Teachers also need to explain the values and expectations of mainstream society, including the obligations of citizens to work together to uphold the rule of law, and the expectation that people should work to support themselves and their families and to maintain and protect property provided at public expense. At a more practical level, education must be linked to vocational training so that Aboriginal people can increasingly take over community management, and have the skills to maintain their possessions.

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<sup>51</sup> The Languages and Culture program delivered by the NT DET has been completely changed and is currently in a policy vacuum.

<sup>52</sup> National Curriculum deals with questions about what all Australian should know about Aboriginal languages and cultures and the rights of local communities to foster their language and culture.

<sup>53</sup> And in some communities, many elders have died or are themselves in trouble from substance abuse.

<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, for some the crisis is resolved by suicide.

## Quality of teaching

Great demands are made on teachers in any culture, but the demands are even greater if a teacher has to teach across a cultural and linguistic interface. Unfortunately, with some exceptions, teachers from mainstream Australia have been poorly selected, and inadequately prepared and supported to face the challenges that arise in remote area schools. Very few teachers have had qualifications for teaching English as a second language, and there have been inadequate efforts to teach teachers the cross-cultural knowledge and skills that are needed<sup>55</sup>.

Many teachers recruited in the past have been ill-prepared to face the challenges in remote area schools. Some have stayed only a few weeks or months, with limited success. Other teachers, while selecting themselves through a sense of vocation and commitment, have developed a romantic attachment to traditional culture, and in adjusting their expectations of children and parents to those of the community, they have accepted poor attendance and outcomes. Few teachers have been dedicated and strong-minded enough to pursue high standards in the difficult cross-cultural environment, often without adequate support from the educational authorities. Many have been asked to teach an inappropriate pedagogy, without adequate resources and have become isolated from the community in which they work.

## Indigenous teachers

Although many Indigenous teachers have been trained over the years, they have been frequently lost to education through recruitment to other areas of the public service or to community organisations. The Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATE) developed in the NT and operating in Queensland now provides remote-area teacher-training for Indigenous trainees who graduate at degree or diploma level. Assistant teachers, usually from the local community, bring linguistic skills and cultural knowledge in remote area schools. They can be essential partners in the “team teaching” approach. As Aboriginal adults, they help students to settle in the early years and their presence is usually helpful in promoting attendance. However, some assistant teachers lack the skills in English to work effectively in English speaking classrooms and some lack the authority in the community to influence attendance<sup>56</sup>.

## Departments of education and teacher-training organizations

Education authorities have not yet solved the problem of effective education for Aboriginal children in remote Australia, and until recently there has been a tendency for bureaucracies to blame the victims, and to not accept a fair share of responsibility. The educational failure is a systemic consequence of the continuing cultural disjunction between traditional communities and mainstream Australia, leading to:

- Social problems arising from overcrowding, poor housing and nutrition, infection, substance abuse and violence which lead in turn to poor child health, loss of sleep and an environment where homework is impossible;
- Difficulties with the provision of pre-school education in remote communities;
- Poor selection and preparation of teachers who must work across the cultural interface;
- Inadequate curriculum and teaching methods, so that students get bored and stay away from school;

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<sup>55</sup> At Northern Territory University, trainee teachers had some preparation and a “bush prac”. However, even today at Charles Darwin University almost none of the local teaching graduates seek jobs in remote schools.

<sup>56</sup> Much of the training of Aboriginal teachers in the Northern Territory has been through Batchelor College. The College was invited to the workshop, but did not respond.

- Teachers having lower expectations of Aboriginal children;
- Limited understanding, by parents and students alike, of the long-term value of education, and of mainstream values and expectations;
- Failure to engage community leaders and parents in school governance and in solving the problem of absenteeism;
- Failure to follow-up with the families of absentee children;
- Logistic difficulties in providing housing and social support for those coming to teach in remote communities.

Furthermore, because of the chicken and egg relationships between health and social problems and education, and because many difficulties arise from differences in cultural expectations and values, teachers should accept that they have a responsibility to explain and discuss these cultural differences and to explain what needs to be done to sustain a healthy culture and lifestyle<sup>57</sup>. If children become aware of the issues, they will be better prepared to play their part by completing their education, staying healthy, finding employment, and helping their communities.

## **National commitment to Indigenous education**

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has made a national commitment to close the gap in Indigenous education in Australia, with a national plan<sup>58</sup> and six accountability domains:

- School readiness
- Engagement and connection
- Attendance
- Literacy and numeracy
- Leadership
- Quality teaching

This Workshop report should be regarded as a working document designed to add to the national discussion about how to solve the educational problems for Indigenous young people, particularly those living in remote and disadvantaged communities.

## ***Concluding remarks***

This report has a particular focus on the education of the 25% of Indigenous children living in remote locations where the social problems of Indigenous people are greatest. It raises some important but value-laden questions for discussion.

With its power to transform lives, the Australian education system cannot continue to step away from a key role as an agent of social change and reform. If Australian society is not prepared to support Indigenous parents, leaders and teachers in meeting this challenge, another generation of Indigenous children will be denied their educational birthright, and will grow up without being able to enjoy the best features of either traditional or mainstream culture.

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<sup>57</sup> In other words, teachers are being asked to resume their role as agents of social change. They will need special support and training to succeed in this task. There would be value in developing short course-work modules with interdisciplinary perspectives, which could be open to Aboriginal leaders, health workers, social workers and police as well as teachers. This would help to prepare the way for the interdisciplinary cooperation that needs to be promoted within communities.

<sup>58</sup> Indigenous Education Action Plan -

[http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/indigenous\\_ed\\_action\\_plan\\_2010-2014\\_consultation,29978.html](http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/indigenous_ed_action_plan_2010-2014_consultation,29978.html)

**How to close the gap in Indigenous education**

**Select Workshop, 7 & 8 July, 2010**

**Venue: The Menzies Foundation  
210 Clarendon Street, East Melbourne**

**Final Program**

**DAY ONE - Wednesday 7 July**

- 8.30 am**      **Coffee and informal greeting**
- 9.00 am**      **SESSION CHAIR - John Mathews**  
*Welcome and introductory remarks on behalf of the Menzies Foundation*
- 9.05 am**      **Introductory remarks by all participants**  
*Participants will introduce themselves, and briefly summarise their experiences and background relevant to the Workshop.*
- 9.30 am**      **Gary Barnes**  
*Indigenous Education - people, relationships and real jobs*
- 10.00 am**     **Steve Goodwin**  
*Commonwealth perspectives on Indigenous Education*
- 10.20 am**     **Discussion**
- 10.30 am**     **Morning tea**

**SESSION CHAIR - Paul Torzillo**

- 11.00 am**     **Jonathan Carapetis and Sven Silburn**  
*Indigenous Education - the need for evidence*
- 11.30 am**     **Gary Robinson**  
*Children between school, family and community: Support for Aboriginal parents and children during the transition to school*
- 11.45 am**     **Helen Harper**  
*The central role of expert teaching in Indigenous schooling*
- 12.00 noon**   **Les Mack**  
*Developing community school partnerships in remote communities*
- 12.15 pm**     **Mark Doecke**  
*Things I have learnt and am still learning: The pros and cons of residential Indigenous schools located in remote communities*
- 12.30 pm**     **Questions & Discussion**
- 12.45 pm**     **Lunch**

**SESSION CHAIR – Tess Lea**

- 2.00 pm**      **Rosa McKenna & Rarriwuy Marika**  
*Community engagement - experience of implementing Remote Learning Partnership Agreement. What have we learned as we move into Indigenous Education Action Plans: The Yirrkala experience*
- 2.15 pm**      **Nalwarri Ngurruwutthun**  
*The Yirrkala Homeland Schools Experience*
- 2.30 pm**      **Christine Nicholls**  
*Issues Surrounding Staffing, Literacy Acquisition and English as a Second Language Programs in Rural Aboriginal Schools: an Educator's Perspective*
- 2.45 pm**      **Barbara Kameniar**  
*The role of the teacher*
- 3.00 pm**      **Nola Purdie**  
*Perspective from Australian Council for Educational Research*
- 3.15 pm**      **Questions and Discussion**
- 3.30 pm**      **Afternoon tea**

**SESSION CHAIR – Christine Nicholls**

- 4.00 pm**      **Rhonda Craven**  
*Seeding success: Potential new turning points*
- 4.15 pm**
- 4.30 pm**      **Discussion to finalise questions for break-out sessions on Day Two**  
*Comments from*
- |                      |                                  |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Merlyne Cruz</i>  | <i>Bess Price</i>                |
| <i>Josie Douglas</i> | <i>Rurruwiliny Ngurruwutthun</i> |
| <i>Emma Kowal</i>    | <i>Paul Torzillo</i>             |
| <i>Tess Lea</i>      | <i>and all others</i>            |
| <i>Janet Mooney</i>  |                                  |
- 5.30 pm**      **End of session**
- 5.45 pm**      **Drinks**
- 6.30 pm**      **Informal Workshop Dinner at the Menzies Foundation**

Copies of some of the presentations are available on the website.

**DAY TWO - Thursday 8 July**

*On Day two, the Workshop will break-out for detailed discussion of important questions. The suggested list of questions, with possible discussion leaders, given below, will be finalised in discussions on the afternoon of Day one, when all participants will have been asked to choose their priority questions. This information will allow us to finalise the scheduling of particular questions to concurrent break-out groups on Day Two so as to provide participants with maximum flexibility of choice.*

**9.00 am Break-out Session One**

*(Questions to be allocated to concurrent groups)*

**10.15 am Morning tea****10.45 am Break-out Session Two**

*(Questions to be allocated to concurrent groups)*

**12.15 pm Lunch****1.15 pm Break-out Session Three**

*(Questions to be allocated to concurrent groups)*

**2.30 pm Plenary Session to Summarise Workshop Outcomes**

*Rapporteurs from each Break-out group will report back, followed by a discussion to agree on how to finalise and distribute the outcomes and any recommendations from the Workshop*

**4.00 pm Close of Workshop and Thanks*****Provisional Break-Out Questions for Day Two***

- 1. How can the evidence-base help to improve Indigenous education?**
- 2. How can teachers be more adequately prepared for teaching Indigenous students, particularly for teaching in schools in remote locations? How can processes for selection, training and support of committed and capable teachers be improved?**

*(CONTINUED NEXT PAGE)*

3. **How can the basics of literacy and numeracy be adequately taught in bush schools from an early age? How can teachers work with community leaders to ensure that students attend regularly?**
4. **What can we learn from different approaches to education for students from remote locations? Tiwi school? Yirrkala school? Ngurr school? Other experiences? What are the pros and cons of boarding schools, interstate schools?**
5. **What changes are needed in the expectations of teachers, parents and students? How might these changes be brought about?**
6. **How can teachers in Indigenous schools also deal with the challenges of teaching a wider curriculum about living skills, about the expectations and values of western culture, and the opportunities that education can provide?**
7. **How can early childhood education be linked to maternal and child health programs at community level? How can parallel health problems (eg otitis media and poor nutrition) be better managed to support educational targets?**
8. **How to help Indigenous students in mainstream schools?**
9. **How might governance and coordination arrangements outside the classroom be improved?**

Notes from the breakout sessions will be available on the website.

## ***ANNEX B List of workshop participants***



Clarendon Terrace  
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East Melbourne Vic 3002

### **How to close the gap in Indigenous education Select Workshop, 7 & 8 July, 2010**

#### **PARTICIPANTS\***

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**DAWSON, Sir Daryl**  
Governor  
Ian Potter Foundation

**DOECKE, Mark**  
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Tiwi Education Board

**DOYLE, Brian**  
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**LEA, Assoc Prof Tess**  
ARC QEII Fellow  
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**MACK, Les**  
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Schools' Support Unit  
Association of Independent Schools of WA

\*Some participants are not able to endorse all aspects of this report.

**McKENNA, Rosa**  
Currently self-employed  
Formerly Principal Yirrikala School NT and  
Manager of Policy and Planning NT DET

**MARIKA, Rarriwuy**  
Yirrkala School & Yambirra Schools Council

**MATHEWS, Coralie**  
Child health educator and advocate

**MATHEWS, Prof John**  
Executive Director  
The Menzies Foundation

**MOONEY, Janet**  
Director  
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**NGURRUWUTTHUN, Nalwarri**  
Homelands Schools

**NGURRUWUTTHUN, Rurruwiliny**  
Homelands Schools

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